WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

New frontiers

eLearning opens doors for continuing education for the workforce

BY MEGAN PATRICK-VAUGHN | of the VBJ

The battle cry for more workforce skill upgrades and professional development has been loud and steady for years, but developing a system that works for the working population is a challenge.

Many educators, legislators and workforce professionals say eLearning may be the answer.

Traditionally, earning a college degree meant converging on a campus, sitting in straight rows with a text book and a professor. It meant having set office hours and spiral notebooks filled with handwritten notes.

No longer.

eLearning is the use of digital technologies to support learning in anytime, anywhere learning spaces. The "e" stands variously for enhanced, electronic or extended, according to Cable Green, eLearning director for the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges in Olympia.

Once called distance learning, eLearning is flexible – key for people in the workforce trying to expand their skills – and growing in popularity.

More than 8 percent of students at community and technical colleges are enrolled in eLearning courses, along with 2.4 percent at four-year universities, said Rep. Deb Wallace, chair of the House Higher Education Committee whose primary goal is to increase access to education.

Locally at Clark College, more than 2,000 students per term are enrolled in online courses – and demand is growing, said former director of eLearning Glen Jenewein.

When online courses hit the scene about 10 years ago, the goal was using technology to bridge the distance between outlying students and educators on campus, Green said.

Now, distance has nothing to do with it.

"Distance has ceased to be relevant because it doesn't matter where your are or where the resources are," he said. "All that matters is you're connected to a network, have the right set of tools and know how to use them."

Growing interest

In 2005, Clark College hired Jenewein to create a comprehensive distance learning program from the ground up. He and a grassroots group of faculty, staff and administrators developed standards for how eclasses should be delivered, developed, designed and how faculty should be trained.

That fall, the school launched 20 classes to 307 students. By 2006, class offerings grew 245 percent to 69, with an average of 889 students enrolled.

"We didn't anticipate the amount of interest from faculty and students," said Jenewein, who recently left the college. "It stunned us."

Now, 120 eLearning courses are offered – and more than 80 others use Blackboard in the classroom – and students can complete an associate's degree online.

Online classes fill in 15 minutes and in the last three to four months, the department – now called eLearning – has seen another spike in student interest.

"I don't know if it's lack of parking or gas prices, but we've seen another huge surge," Jenewein said.

Since launching eLearning, Clark has recouped many students it lost to Portland Community College, where they went to take online courses before eLearning was established at Clark.

The college's service area includes Clark, Skamania and west Klickitat counties, but most of the school's eLearning students live near campus, Jenewein said.
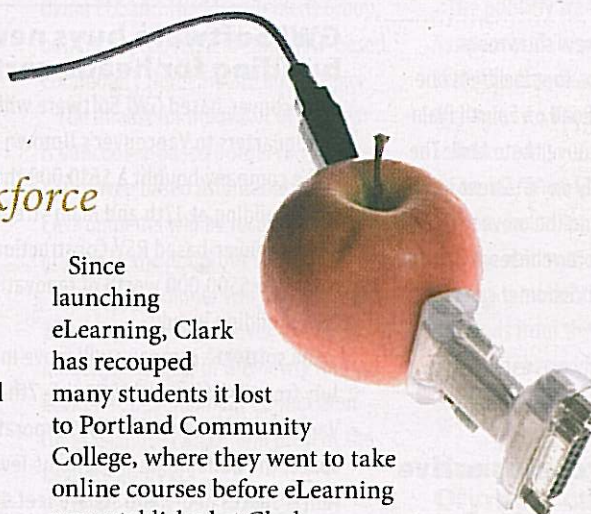
Learning in the workplace

Vancouver-based sawmill Columbia Vista Corp. introduced a mandatory 52-week eLearning course for its seven millwrights that covered a gamut of topics from mechanical maintenance and basic electrical theory to power transmission and hydraulic power systems.

"The guys were able to come in on their own time – before or after work, or at home – and work on the programs and take tests," said Safety and Environmental Manager Devin Sanders.

Sanders said the company looked into area community colleges for continuing education, but they came with $20,000 to $30,000 price tags. Columbia Vista hooked up with Coastal Training Technologies Corp.'s ClarityNet online courses for $5,000 – half of which was a one-time set-up fee.

The program came with a few kinks, he said, but it has since been upgraded and the company was able to customize the program to what was relevant for the millwrights.

"They work a graveyard shift, so the computer courses were more convenient," Sanders said.

Open education

A global movement is pushing for open educational resources and is turning the idea of information access on its ear.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology launched Open CourseWare, which made all of the school's course materials available online for free. Then Yale, University of California, Berkeley and Utah State University followed suit.

Cable Green, eLearning director for the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, said what is being given away is only the content – not the courses, interaction with professors or the diploma.

"They did it for two reasons – first, it's the right thing to do," he said. "And they put creative commons licenses and share alike clauses on their content, which means if people use the content and change it, the user must give the university the changes."

This is highly beneficial to the universities. For instance, an MIT graduate student from China returned to his home country where he started tutoring services. He translated MIT's materials into Mandarin Chinese and started tutoring high school students in the content.

The bonus for MIT? It now has all of its materials translated into Mandarin Chinese.

Another project, Flat World Knowledge, plans to make textbooks available for free online – challenging the rising cost of books. Students are able to have an actual book for the cost of shipping and paper or free as PDFs.

"eLearning is an umbrella – it asks the question, how do we use technology to support teaching and learning?" Green said.

Who's eLearning?

eLearners are looking for flexibility. They are single parents, working people, deployed military students, 40-somethings who many not be comfortable in a classroom with younger students and high school students in Running Start programs.

Or they are folks who don't want to get up and drive to an 8 a.m. class.

Faculty members also are seeing the benefit of more flexible schedules, said Glen Jenewein, Clark College's dean of eLearning. They can go on a trip for a few days and check on their classes, and part-time instructors can work for more than one school and earn a solid living, Jenewein said.

Instructors must be trained in both how to navigate eLearning software – in Clark's case, Blackboard – and how to deliver online courses, which is much different than teaching in a classroom.

"They've got to know how to use podcasts, wikis, blogs – all of the tools that keep students engaged," he said.

Clark spends about $100,000 per year on Blackboard, and Jenewein said student fees don't come close to covering the cost.

eLearning students pay regular tuition with a $30 online fee or $15 for hybrid courses.

The company offers tuition reimbursement for any of its 96 employees in any field of study if they earn a "B" grade or better.

A bill was passed in the last legislative session to study this kind of workplace-based eLearning.

The study, to be conducted by the state Board for Community and Technical Colleges and the state Workforce Education and Training Coordinating Board, will examine the best practices and standards for eLearning in general, and also specifically look at how eLearning can work for workplace-based education, said Carolyn Cummins, BCTC policy associate who focuses on workforce and economic development.

The boards will look at what the private industry's role may be in furthering continuing education and whether it will pay off.

"Another piece of being a skilled and capable worker is about how to acquire information," Cummins said. "Employers want employees to be able to get information and solve problems."

That represents a change in the fundamental nature of the workplace, she said.

"Information used to be very hard to get and coveted," she said. "Now it's virtually unlimited and people are expected to know how to get it."

The bill's intent is to create up to eight statewide pilot projects for workplace-based eLearning. The pilots would create a three-party buy-in, with workers, the state and employers.

"Greater success means having the ability to gain greater job skill, which translates to greater income," Wallace said. "It means our employers can find the skilled workers they need, and we'll have the ability to customize skills to the workplace where it's needed."

Students demand change

The way learning takes place is changing, and what's driving the change are students and the economy, Jenewein said.

"What you're going to see in the next few years are less college buildings and more virtual campuses because that's what our clients are going to be asking for," he said. "We'll put more money into infrastructure and access to high-speed Internet in rural areas."

> ## "Standing still is no longer an option."
> —*Cable Green, eLearning director for the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges*

Rather than more brick and mortar classroom buildings, the college's service area will likely see Clark College storefronts for remote high-speed computer labs, he said.

For Clark, the next push is hybrid courses, which mix classroom time and online courses and "college in the high school," which allows high school students to take college courses at their schools and participate in extracurricular activities.

The college also is looking toward "weekend college," which allows students to earn an entire degree with weekend classroom time only. It is a hybrid model and students would be allowed to take a full load of three courses per term.

Regardless of how popular eLearning becomes, traditional classrooms aren't going anywhere.

There will always be students and faculty who aren't meant for online learning, but if the education system does not change, it will be impossible for America to compete globally, Green said.

"Standing still is no longer an option," Green said. "Students aren't standing still – their demands for service are moving at the same pace technology moves."

In a global economy, higher education is also going global, he said.

"Traditional ways of doing things, while they'll continue, are being disrupted by new models and that's a good thing," Green said. "It really is urgent. We need an educated citizenry to compete in the global economy. Higher ed is a traditional structure itself. If we're not open to change like other traditional structures, we will be irrelevant."

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