



Making sure online is on target

The School of Education's IST department teams with innovative program at Center Grove
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These days, conventional wisdom is not that online learning is really a “new” thing in education. But considering how most classes have used online access so far, robust online learning might just really be getting underway.

“The way online learning has been used in K-12 environments has been traditionally been through some type of software program,” said Joanna Ray, the director of online learning for the [Center Grove Global Campus](#), part of the Center Grove Community School Corporation in Greenwood. Ray (BS’01 and MS’05 in elementary education from the IU School of Education) has been examining online learning in both practice and purpose for some time. She teaches graduate-level educational technology courses as an adjunct instructor at the IU School of Education at IUPUI where she was the director of online development before joining Center Grove. She said she was surprised by how few K-12 students had actually taken an online class when she arrived. She found that those who had typically did so through credit recovery programs, which generally consisted of one teacher monitoring a variety of courses in a classroom setting.

“While these software programs certainly serve students’ needs to get back on track for graduation, students are missing the social interaction piece,” she said. “They’re missing the collaboration. I wouldn’t say it’s emulating the true potential of an online learning experience.”

So Ray has been the force behind a project that endeavors to bring students, teachers, and others into a true online learning experience. And IU School of Education faculty and doctoral students are working alongside to ensure the experience is valuable and beneficial.

Center Grove Global Campus has launched courses providing new online learning opportunities which will eventually feature three distinct programs, providing students the chance for earning class credit, recovering credit for previous poor performance, and continuing learning. “This is something really innovative that Center Grove has done, and Center Grove is recognized as a leader for online learning within the state of Indiana,” said Anne Ottenbreit-Leftwich, associate professor in the [Instructional Systems Technology department](#) at the IU School of Education.

In part because of that recognition, Ottenbreit-Leftwich and IST graduate students began working with the Global Campus in the spring. The IST partners are giving guidance, feedback, and advice on the online courses that the Center Grove teachers are preparing for what is called the “Ignite” program, online course offerings for initial credit offered to Center Grove students (Ray said the credit recovery program called “Revive” is in development and should begin next summer; a third area called “The Niche” will offer continuing learning to community members and others, with a launch date to be announced).

“We have four or five of our IST PhD students as well as myself meet with teachers,” Ottenbreit-Leftwich said. “The teachers are presenting their online courses to us and then we’re providing prompts, advice, questions, to get them to think about other ways to ramp up the online instruction and consider different perspectives.” She added that Ray has pushed teachers to think of the courses as much more than a post-it-and-respond matter.

“Then we’re actually going to be helping Joanna investigate the success of those courses and where they can be improved,” Ottenbreit-Leftwich said. “We have a few different things we’re looking at, for example, the design judgment of teachers, why teachers make these decisions about what to include in their online courses, for recommendations to other teachers in the future. We are also examining what tools and activities best support specific subject areas and topics.”

The partnership fulfills part of the vision Ray had for the Global Campus, that of bringing in new ways of teaching but finding ways to ensure those new ways were having proper impact. “When I began my work at Center Grove, having a research partner with Global Campus was one of my first initiatives,” Ray said. “I didn’t want to get too far down the road and not have the data and the research to support the decisions we’re making.”

For IST researchers, the data can provide a sort of roadmap for what works in K-12 teaching online. “It will be very informative for our field as instructional designers to understand what K12 designers and teachers in the real world really do when they face the constraints of the K-12 environment,” said Khendum Gyabak, a PhD student in the IST program who has researched online learning and tools. “It will be informative to know more about the practice of instructional design in the real world and perhaps shift our understanding of design in our field.”

Such data will also be helpful in preparing the next generation of K-12 teachers who will soon be designing their own online learning environments. “This is one of the things that we’re looking at as an option, too—how do we better prepare our pre-service teachers here at IU to teach in an online environment,” Ottenbreit-Leftwich said. “It’s becoming more and more of an expectation for teachers to be able to teach in blended learning environments, if not teaching a fully online course. Trying to get them prepared for that in their pre-service teacher education experience is important, and one we need to consider to prepare them for their future careers as K-12 educators, especially since many states are now requiring high school students to take at least one online class to graduate.”

All involved in the project say the possibilities for discovery and creativity are vast. Ottenbreit-Leftwich said instructional designers often aren’t well-versed in the content taught through their learning modules. In this case, the content experts (teachers) are also in charge of the design. One of the early findings from the research into the Global Campus effort has found that’s had impact beyond online. “It has re-energized their teaching, even how they approach teaching in the classroom,” Ray said. “Teachers say designing online has made them a better face-to-face teacher as well.”

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