

Title of Session: Alt/Correctional Ed Forum

Moderator: BJ Berquist

Guest Speaker: Nathan Lowell

Title of File: 20060817alted

Date: August 17, 2006

Room: Alt/Correctional Ed Group

NathanL: I'm teaching a distance ed course starting next week

NathanL: for Morehead state in KY

SusanR joined the room.

NathanL: I've assigned them to get a TI account, set up an office, and attend a tips and tricks

NathanL: hi Susan

BJB2: cool. What is the course?

SusanR: Hi Nathan

BJB2: thanks, Nate.

NathanL: educ685 principles of distance ed

JeffC joined the room.

NathanL: graduate course for teachers looking to get their MA step in pay

NathanL: hi Jeff

JeffC waves

NathanL: any problems for tomorrow?

NathanL: community should be up and cooking

JeffC: well... if your site is up, I think they unblocked it, but not 100% sure.

NathanL: it IS up

JeffC: cool

NathanL: or it was last I looked

NathanL: and I've isolated the machine so that's the only thing running on it at the moment

NathanL: it says it's up

JeffC: great

NathanL: so .. Susan? you're the only one not already registered on the Open Tap I think

NathanL: what would you all like to know?

NathanL: did my link die?

BJB2: you're fine, Nate

NathanL: thanks bj ..

BJB2: Can you please restate the purpose of your community?

NathanL: sure

SusanR: how are you using open tap for your community

NathanL: one of the problems with research in the low incidence fields

NathanL: is that the community is geographically dispersed

NathanL: a low incidence disability is any condition that presents in less than 1/4 of 1% of the school age population in the US

NathanL: we're talking about blind, deaf, and severe disabilities

NathanL: in a school district .. there may be only ONE student in any of the categories

NathanL: so getting the kinds of research that the Feds want using clinical trial models

NathanL: is very difficult

BJB2 nods

NathanL: we wanted a way for researchers from around the country

NathanL: to be able to have a kind of "research water cooler"

NathanL: someplace they could go, talk to other researchers, maybe find some collaboration

NathanL: set up their virtual offices and see what develops

NathanL: we have a variety of tools that we could use

BJB2: why did you choose to create your own community rather than just use a group room in Tapped In?

NathanL: but the OpenTap approach gives us the kind of security that we want/need

NathanL: because TI is for education .. and while research is certainly part of that

NathanL: we wanted a place that was specifically geared to research in special ed

NathanL: I'm not sure that's the right approach, frankly

BJB2: what obstacles are you facing?

NathanL: but it grew out of a 'Research Clearinghouse' initiative that we have goin on right now

NathanL: and the clearinghouse will be the publication arm ...

NathanL: but we thought we needed a "pre publication" or a kind of "hang out" for people

NathanL: so far, just the OpenTap code

NathanL: we are still running on a prototype server

NathanL: while I make room on the real machine

NathanL: we'll be announcing this to the research community next month at a research summit in Vail

NathanL: we re hoping that by doing a lot of "in the room hand holding" while we have them there in the mountains

NathanL: that we'll get them excited about the possibilities

NathanL: and they'll take it home with them to their colleagues at their home institutions

NathanL: we had considered doing a group thing in TI to be honest

NathanL: but when I put that up as a suggestion to the directors, they wanted a place that was just for the SPED research community

NathanL: and I think they want to emphasize ONLY low incidence .. but I'm fighting them on that

NathanL: if we get 20 people .. that will be a BIG research effort in our area

BJB2 nods.

NathanL: and the investment for us to run it is very small

NathanL: we already have servers .. lines ... and a national presence in blindness and deafness

NathanL: with the big kick off at the Research in the Rockies summit next month ... we'll see

NathanL: it's been enlightening to be digging around in the code

NathanL: and I've gotten a better appreciation for the environment, I must say

NathanL: there's still a problem with the fragmentation of information

NathanL: I don't know how to deal with that

NathanL: but it's been an education in its own right

BJB2: what tools do you have so that you can collect the information in a more orderly way?

NathanL: well, if we used something like a drupal installation

NathanL: posts and writings would be collected and collatable

NathanL: but we'd lose the "individualization" of having a virtual office

NathanL: and the group rooms

NathanL: the library function here is an interesting solution

NathanL: but it's not implemented in OpenTap

NathanL: (or if it is, I haven't found it yet)

NathanL: the issue is that it's not always easy to find out what's floating about in the environment

BJB2: can you create a resource room where you would encourage members to post their research?

NathanL: the flexibility and free form nature of the space ... while a strength in permitting the ad hoc creation of groups

BJB2: . o O (at least it would be in one central location)

NathanL: ya .. we're thinking that we'd use the reception as a kind of "here's what I'm thinking about" clearinghouse

NathanL: and we'll have an associated web space for posting results ... we're hoping to turn it into a peer reviewed journal eventually

BJB2: by getting the members to subscribe to the reception discussion board...

BJB2: each time someone posts, everyone would get that post

NathanL: ya

NathanL: so they'd be able to stay up with what's going on in the community even if they're not logging in every day -- or even every week

BJB2 nods

NathanL: the synchronous nature of the space works against small groups

SusanR listens

NathanL: so we need to find ways to leverage the async aspects

BJB2: don't forget the whiteboard

BJB2: and notes

NathanL: if there are only 20 members .. then it's not likely that somebody will actually be here when a member logs in

NathanL: even with TI .. with 19,000 members .. how often do you see more than a handful here?

BJB2 nods

NathanL: that's true .. and if we can use this as a kind of 'drop in space' that just happens to support sync communications

NathanL: I think we have a chance to promote some different kinds of collaboration than the mainstream is used to

BJB2: the greatest obstacle to synch is the different time zones

BJB2: . o O (and the crazy schedules we all have)

NathanL: the really good thing about SPED is they are much more flexible about technology

NathanL: ya .. that's exactly right

BJB2: in what way, Nate?

NathanL: and we're concerned with the 6 time zones across the US

BJB2: . o O (I'd love to find flexible SPED teachers!)

NathanL: my experience is that the people engaged in SPED have to adopt technology that they don't know anything about every day

NathanL: a new braille reader

NathanL: a new hearing aid

NathanL: a new captioning technology

BJB2: I did post the blurb you sent to the CEA SPED listserv...

BJB2: but you might want to join that list and publicize your group

NathanL: whatever it takes .. they're always looking for ways to help/reach students

NathanL: thanks

BJB2: membership to the lists is free. You can sign up at www.ceanational.org

NathanL: cool .. bookmarking it now

NathanL: the difficult part of communities of practice is that they only exist "in the wild"

NathanL: you can't really cultivate them

NathanL: so this is a risk

BJB2: you also might want to check their calendar and schedule a workshop for one of their annual conferences

NathanL: we may not get anybody to play with us

NathanL: that's a good idea!

BJB2 smiles. You are correct that they are a timid bunch and are not risk takers

NathanL: well, it's not so much "risk taker" as "benefit skeptical"

BJB2: partly because SPED students require so much continuity and stability.

NathanL: that's true

BJB2: benefit skeptical in that they don't want to share the glory of their research?

NathanL: no . they're skeptical about claims of benefit

BJB2: they will have to be in collaborative mode to gain anything from the community

NathanL: right .. and we hope that they'll see the value of collaboration

BJB2: what do you tell people who raise that question about benefits?

NathanL: well, I try not to "over promise"

BJB2 chuckles

NathanL: the argument goes something like

NathanL: yes, it's something new and different

NathanL: and it might not actually pan out for you

NathanL: but you're in a silo by yourself now

NathanL: and what you can do is limited by your immediate resources

NathanL: by joining into the community ... we can band together

NathanL: perhaps find resources

NathanL: perhaps come up with different ideas

NathanL: perhaps come up with some solutions

NathanL: or maybe just ask some interesting questions

NathanL: the cost is relatively low

NathanL: the risk is slight

BJB2: you sound like the consummate salesman, Nate!

NathanL: the benefits are potentially exponential

NathanL: I believe in my product :D

NathanL: I've spent close to 15 years in online environments

NathanL: so I know what they can and can't do

BJB2 nods

NathanL: the motto of the National Center on Low-Incidence Disabilities is

NathanL: Together we can do more.

BJB2: have you found any other community where the collegiality is as strong?

NathanL: we're just finding ways to help more people get together in different ways

BJB2 nods

NathanL: ya .. there are a lot of places

NathanL: but few of them are 'professional'

BJB2: hmmm...that's interesting

NathanL: I'm looking at the social aspects of "fan" sites

NathanL: and at the collaborative environments like the various Pern Mushes

BJB2: not quite the same thing

NathanL: those places are fascinating

NathanL: well, actually, the only thing that's different is the subject matter

NathanL: and the fact that those sites, everybody's involved because they have some passion for the subject

NathanL: why do "professionals" not share that level of passion?

NathanL: if we can solve that conundrum, we'll have a really nice piece of wisdom

BJB2: au contraire....I think educators can be very passionate

NathanL: I do too

NathanL: SOME educators

NathanL: and under some conditions

BJB2: exactly

NathanL: so .. we're left with .. what conditions?

BJB2: and how can we duplicate them

NathanL: what is it that drives educators to be "fans" of education

NathanL: yea

NathanL: exactly

BJB2: let's hold that thought and continue this discussion next month?

NathanL: I'm a "fan" of distance ed

NathanL: of online collaborative environments

NathanL: hence my involvement here

BJB2: are you available at the same time on September 21?

NathanL: (which has been dreadfully light lately because of work commitments)

NathanL: ya .. should be

NathanL: we're over the hour I see

BJB2 sighs. Work always seems to be such a distraction!

NathanL: well I have so much really fascinating work to do

BJB2: . o O (school would be a lot more fun if the kids would stop bothering me)

NathanL: I'm working 16h days

NathanL: 7 days a week these days getting ready for fall

BJB2: yikes...don't burn yourself out

NathanL: the current project is online braille training

BJB2: interesting

NathanL: teaching braille at a distance is a PAIN

NathanL: I've been working on that problem for 6 years

BJB2: I would imagine it's as difficult as using text to teach a foreign language

NathanL: and this semester we're rolling out the first online, computer graded braille

NathanL: that's delivered via web browser

NathanL: no plugins

BJB2: wow! no wonder you're so busy

SusanR is amazed

NathanL: I'm in the middle of coding up the drills and practices now

NathanL: but I've put the entire National Library Service manual of braille transcription online

NathanL: you can use our tools to create braille on the screen using your computer

NathanL: in a web browser

NathanL: so .. you see a text string

BJB2: are you teaching braille to visually impaired students?

NathanL: enter the braille

NathanL: and the computer will tell you if it's right

NathanL: not yet

NathanL: we're working with some VI students to figure out how to present the screen to them in a way that makes sense

NathanL: we WANT to use the new refreshable braille displays

BJB2: what a challenge!

NathanL: so you can plug in a USB device

NathanL: that lifts little pins in the braille cells

NathanL: the problem is that online braille training is graphical by nature

NathanL: unless you have a refreshable display

NathanL: and until very recently they cost upwards of 10,000USD

BJB2: kind of salty

NathanL: there are some new ones coming on the market in the 1200 range

NathanL: actually, if the student uses a "braille note" as their primary device

NathanL: it's a kind of PDA that uses braille instead of a video screen

JeffC: do you use Dragon Naturally Speaking with blind students?

NathanL: no. they use a different technology

NathanL: blind students use JAWS and WindowEyes to read the text from the screens

NathanL: typing isn't a problem for blind students

NathanL: and many blind students use braille based pc's these days

NathanL: the issue is when they have to use websites that are designed with a lot of flash

NathanL: and heavy graphics that are not properly described

BJB2 nods off to sleep and falls out of her chair

NathanL: hehe ..ya

NathanL: we're over time

NathanL: and I'm boring the socks off ya

BJB2 . o O (not the company or the topic!)

BJB2: just an exhausting week.

NathanL: I need to go get kids ready for bed, too

NathanL: I can't go until they're down :D

BJB2: Thanks, Nate. I'm looking forward to the discussion being continued next month. I'll push for the SPED group to join us too.

SusanR: fascinating, Nathan

NathanL: thanks Susan

BJB2 waves goodnight.

NathanL: good night all

NathanL: and good luck tomorrow Jeff

JeffC: thanks

BJB2: we'll be cheering for you, Jeff!

NathanL waves "So long!"