

Institutional implementation of Wikis in higher education

Technology has added new dimensions to traditional distance education. By increasing access to information and creating a virtual collaborative environment, new opportunities to make education accessible to a wider audience are developing. To maximize the opportunity, educational organizations, like institutions of higher education, are beginning to develop strategies to implement new distance education techniques into their course catalogs.

The Open University of Israel (OUI) was started as a mail correspondence university in 1974. The curriculum was entirely based on self study programs where course materials were used by students at home and periodic written assignments and tests were completed through the mail. The students often noted a feeling of isolation and loneliness. As the Internet emerged and open source and collaborative tools became more prevalent in the 2000's, the OUI saw the opportunity to change its strategy and expand its enrollment.

To shift its strategy, the OUI acted in three specific areas to implement a sustainable use of Wikis as a base for distance education. The first area of focus was on the technology itself. This includes elements related to the software and hardware needed, the ongoing maintenance of the technology and the availability of adequate support for faculty and students. The second area was on the pedagogy of the faculty. By moving from a self directed environment to a more collaborative learning environment, faculty required professional development to assist with the transition. The use of this format allows for the distance education environment to foster social learning and constructivism. Faculty would need support to transition to this new teaching environment in order to overcome fear and anxiety that traditionally accompanies this level of change. The third area of focus was on the administrative responsibilities. Administration must find a balance between fostering development while not repressing innovation through rules and regulation. It is also the administration of the institution to manage the financial investments needed for the technology, support and staff development needed for the transition.

After strategies are developed, the OUI needed to implement and sustain the transition so an effective evaluation of the project could be completed. To initiate the implementation plan, the OUI used a small number of champions to get the project started. These champions were a group of individuals within the university with good standing in the university community but were also willing to invest their time and energy into the project at the early stages. As the champions dealt with the early troubles, expansion of the implementation plan to larger segments of the university community became easier. This is similar to the Beta testing used by many technology companies today. OUI also instituted measures to evaluate and assess the new technology usage. They used surveys, reports and log files to develop qualitative and quantitative measures of the wikis in education.

While the use of the wikis in education at OUI have been largely successful and the development mirrors many of the distance education tools used in American institutions of higher education, the project identified constraints of the format. Certain subjects were good fits into the

collaborative online learning environment like English and sciences but mathematics were difficult. The design of the software had a large impact on its usage and acceptance by new students and faculty. Ultimately, sustainable collaborative distance education requires a holistic approach to ensure that the academic staff are accepting of the technology and pedagogical shift required for the undertaking and administration is approachable in their management and coordination of the implementation process.