Electronic Learning Community

A just in time, just for me professional development resource for educators

CTE

Johns Hopkins University
Center for Technology in Education
A partnership of the Maryland State Department of Education
JHU CTE Electronic Learning Community Technology: An Overview

The inherent interactive features of the Internet have created a “virtual place” for learning and communicating. Technology offers myriad ways to establish connections, seek advice, collaborate, exchange ideas, and gain insight. Online learning communities provide like-minded professionals with a space to connect, gather information, and construct knowledge. Virtual learning environments blur geographic boundaries and empower people separated by time and distance to engage in lively and enlightening professional discourse at their convenience.

To foster connections and provide cohesiveness for professional communities, the Johns Hopkins University Center for Technology in Education (JHU CTE) has developed a Web-based tool, called an Electronic Learning Community (ELC). The ELC is a password-protected environment that promotes ongoing collaborative exchange and provides convenient channels for synchronous and asynchronous communication.

Developed in 2000, the ELC technology was designed to further CTE's mission of improving the quality of life for all children and youth through teaching, research, and leadership in the uses of technology. CTE now supports over 50 ELCs for more than 10,000 members. All the ELCs support initiatives that fundamentally change the way educators are recruited, prepared, inducted, and mentored within the complex environment of today's schools.

Each community has one or more facilitators who provide professional development leadership and create a secure, caring environment that promotes active engagement, cohesiveness, and a sense of belonging for members. Facilitators model uses, interactions, and pedagogical applications within the context of the online learning community. Facilitators are supported through CTE's wrap-around services.

Pre-service and in-service educators use the ELC to exchange ideas, information, and resources through email, threaded discussions, archives of materials, and a centralized, interactive calendar. The ELC serves as a rich repository of resources for community members. Participants can post, store, retrieve, and share files containing relevant content submitted by other community members. Within the ELC, synchronous communication offers educators who are physically distant a place to gather to make immediate decisions, exchange information, or seek advice. The asynchronous features allow members a forum for timely sharing of successes as well as a vehicle for “just in time, just for me” solutions.

The Center for Technology in Education is part of the Graduate Division of Education in the School of Professional Studies in Business and Education, Johns Hopkins University.
Electronic Learning Community Design

Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the pursuit of academic excellence includes ensuring that high-quality educators are employed in America's schools. The ultimate goal of professional development is to increase student academic achievement. To support the attainment of that goal, the ELC provides educators with a tool that supports continuous interaction, promotes the ready exchange of ideas, and encourages examination and understanding of new pedagogical practices.

The ELC's design incorporates the community building and high-performance teaming strategies for which CTE is known. The ELC offers features and functionalities that are intuitive for novice participants yet sophisticated enough to meet the needs of more experienced members. The ELC is Web-based, so it is available from any computer connected to the Internet.

The ELC incorporates specific functions and features to support its use in building and maintaining communities of learners:

**Homepage:** Members access the ELC homepage upon login. The homepage serves as a gateway to all content and members within the community.

**Announcements:** Facilitators post announcements, which are immediately viewable on the ELC homepage upon member login. Announcements keep all participants up-to-date on relevant community-wide information.

**Community bulletin board:** All members of the community are able to post important messages or updates on a community- or theme-based discussion forum.

**Calendar:** A centralized calendar allows community members to update events and connect them to pertinent content.

**Discussion:** Chat and instant messaging supply a synchronous forum for individual, small group, or entire community interaction. Chat materials may be archived and disseminated to community members. Threaded discussion forums provide a central place and mechanism for members to communicate and exchange materials over time and at will.

**Resource library:** The fully searchable library allows for managing, exchanging, archiving, and accessing materials. Access to certain folders, files, or links can be open or restricted to individuals or groups.

**Search:** Key word search allows members to connect immediately to desired content.

**Directory:** Member profiles are collected into a fully searchable directory that may be configured for group or mass e-mail communication.
Key Features of the Electronic Learning Community

**New content log:** Upon login, members are provided with a list of content that has been added since their last login.

**Themes:** Themes are subcommunities within the ELC. They can be created by any community member for the purpose of sharing information about a particular topic or subject area.

**Groups:** Members with shared interests can form groups within the larger community to enhance collaborative opportunities and professional development.

**Permissions:** Permissions are applicable to all components of the ELC to support the formation of subgroups, allow for public and private communication, and facilitate resource exchange and storage.

**Members online:** When a member logs in, s/he is able to see the other community members who are also logged in.

**Content connections:** All ELC content is assigned to subject categories, which can be cross-referenced to help organize resources.

**Content subscriptions:** The subscription function allows members to choose areas of interest and receive notification on their ELC homepage when new information about a specific topic has been added.

**Email notification:** Members can opt to be alerted by email when new content is posted within a subscribed theme.

**Member feature:** Participant photos and information are randomly featured on the ELC homepage to promote community familiarity and build cohesiveness.

**Management levels:** A core group of ELC “facilitators” is identified from the community, and trained by CTE to facilitate engagement and interaction, organize and archive information, and examine usage statistics.

Benefits of the Electronic Learning Community

- Offers functionalities and convenient ways for individuals with common interests to gather to exchange information and resources, solve problems, and construct new knowledge.
- Supports capacity building on individual and organizational levels.
- Supports independent and self-paced learning.
- Establishes a shared knowledge base among community members.
- Encourages members to contribute and participate across traditional professional hierarchies.
- Promotes emerging leadership by offering community management opportunities.
- Promotes joint engagement and the creation of shared ways of communicating and teaching.
- Includes tools and features that support effective community development as well as efficient resource organization.
For More Information

For more information about the Johns Hopkins CTE Electronic Learning Community technology and how it could benefit your organization, please contact:

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The Johns Hopkins University Center for Technology in Education strives to improve the quality of life of children and youth, particularly those with special needs, through teaching, research, and leadership in the use of technology. CTE is a unique partnership combining the research and teaching resources of Johns Hopkins University and the leadership and policy support of the Maryland State Department of Education.

For more information about CTE, visit our Web site: http://cte.jhu.edu

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