

CaseSTUDY

Kate Place

Dakota State University: How Do We Make Evaluation More Relevant to Educators?



Dakota State University is a small public university that serves many part-time, working students. Most of its graduate programs are offered exclusively online to accommodate the schedules of working students, and 80 percent of graduate students are enrolled part time. Many students seek a relevant, practical education that they can directly apply to their current or future work.

At the Dakota State University College of Education, Assistant Professor Kevin Smith teaches graduate students in the Master of Science in Educational Technology program. The majority of Smith's students are full-time classroom teachers who aspire to transition into new roles as technology coordinators or technology integration specialists within schools. His students want concrete knowledge and skills on how to effectively integrate educational technology into classrooms.

Dakota State University

Location:

Eastern South Dakota

Type of university:

Public

Number of undergraduate and graduate students:
3,100

Student population:

83% White
4% Black
4% Hispanic/Latino
2% Asian
7% Other/not reported

THE INITIATIVE

Smith teaches a course called "Leading Evaluation and Change in the Educational Technology Environment" to help students understand how to evaluate educational technology and how to make decisions based on evidence. In the first year he taught the course, Smith led students through a formal evaluation process. However, the students were new to conducting research, and the formal evaluation approach did not resonate with them. Smith felt as though students viewed the evaluation methods as a degree requirement, rather than a useful skill that they could apply in their schools. Smith found that there was a disconnect between the evaluation methods taught in the course and the needs of educators. "Feedback from the students indicated they didn't feel like they would have the time or resources to conduct such an evaluation in their school," said Smith.

Wanting to make the course more relevant and practical for educators, Smith searched for resources that would help him revamp his course. He found the Ed Tech Rapid Cycle Evaluation Coach shortly after the online toolkit was launched and decided to integrate the Coach into his spring 2017 course. Smith believed that the Coach would enable his students to understand how to conduct an evaluation and how evaluations can be useful for decision making about educational technology.

As their capstone project, Smith's students were required to set up an evaluation of an educational technology using the Coach. The students designed evaluations of Khan Academy, Google Classroom, Final Cut Pro, and other technologies. To demonstrate their work, they created screencasts with voiceover explanations of their process for each step of the Coach. A few students selected technologies or

outcomes that were not a good fit for rapid cycle evaluations. “For example, one student wanted to evaluate whether students preferred Final Cut Pro vs. iMovie,” Smith noted. Because this student had data only on the opinions and perceptions of study participants, he “had a difficult time working through some of the steps provided by the Coach,” said Smith. Overall, however, students gave positive feedback about the Coach and their evaluation and course experiences.

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Tips for conducting rapid cycle evaluation in the Coach

Examine the effectiveness of a specific program, practice, or application that should have short-term impacts

Develop a narrow, focused research question

Choose an outcome that is specific, aligned with your goals for the program/practice, and quantitatively measurable

Select a measurement tool that is consistent and reliable across participants and time, representative of the outcome, and valid

Have the ability to implement the intervention and collect data in a short timeframe

THE WAY FORWARD

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When he teaches the course next year, Smith plans to make several modifications to improve the teaching and learning process. He will introduce the Coach early in the course and use it as a framework to teach students how to plan and conduct an evaluation. In addition, he plans to have his students design and carry out a full rapid cycle evaluation to make the experience more authentic and practical. As part of this, he will work more closely with each student to select an appropriate technology, think through the study design, and select a relevant quantitative outcome.

Smith believes that the Coach, and the preparation that students receive in his course, can help educators make better, more informed decisions. “Schools are making decisions all the time, and they don’t have money or access to trained evaluators,” Smith said. According to Smith, the Coach can help make evaluation accessible and relevant to educators and inform their decisions on the use of educational technology in their schools.

