

The Knowledge Loom: Supporting School Improvement Through Online Dissemination of Best Practices and Collaborative Inquiry to Put Them into Action

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ABSTRACT

The Knowledge Loom (<http://knowledgeloom.org>) web site, its companion Professional Development Workbook, and content partner data-input interface are examples of technology-supported tools intended to build learning communities that develop teaching expertise. The goal is to collect distributed teaching and learning knowledge and begin the process of weaving it into a rich tapestry of understanding of teaching and learning. The Knowledge Loom is a place where the work of educational researchers and practitioners comes together to put what works in teaching and learning into practice.

KEYWORDS

professional development, community building, technology, collaborative inquiry, interactive tools, K-12, best practices, proven practices, research-based, research to practice, collegial sharing, knowledge building

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Riel, Associate Director at the Center for Collaborative Research in Education, notes that “Expert teacher knowledge is not routinely recorded, negotiated, and stored in community spaces for use by new members of the community.” Riel cites *The Knowledge Loom: What Works in Teaching & Learning* (<http://knowledgeloom.org>) as an example of a Web-based resource that exemplifies a new way of thinking about teacher expertise. The Knowledge Loom supports community-oriented models of professional development in four ways: (1) free, easy-to-use, online access to rich content about exemplary practices in K-12 education; (2) a suite of interactive tools that encourage broad sharing of educational practice/experience; (3) a Workbook that outlines a series of collaborative inquiry activities focused around Knowledge Loom content; (4) a Web-based administrative interface that allows selected content partners to regularly add content to the best-practices database. The Knowledge Loom is the 2001 recipient of the Distinguished Achievement Award in the category of technology-supported professional development from the Educational Publishers Association.

WHAT IS THE KNOWLEDGE LOOM?

The Knowledge Loom is a rich database of proven educational practices structured around theme-based collections called “spotlights.” Spotlights contain lists and explanations of best practices, supporting success stories from schools and teachers, pointers to research, links to related resources that can be found on other Web sites, and a set of interactive tools that prompt users to input knowledge of their own. In some cases, these interactive tools include a threaded panel discussion with experts in the field. The goal is, through a series of both on site and online opportunities, to collect fragments of teaching and learning knowledge and experience from participants and begin the process of weaving them into a rich tapestry of understanding of teaching and learning.

HOW DOES THE KNOWLEDGE LOOM SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Teachers sometimes say that the best kind of professional development comes from talking with other teachers—they can get advice that feels practical and relevant. The Knowledge Loom and its companion Professional Development Workbook are predicated on the value of educators talking together, sharing their insights, and asking questions together. But in order for this exchange to be meaningful and effective, the discussion must be focused around educationally sound content, like the content provided on The Knowledge Loom. Educators access The Knowledge Loom collections to locate selected information, as needed, for school improvement planning and inspiration, pose important questions for answers from both local colleagues and others knowledgeable in the field, and contribute expertise via the various interactive components. Sometimes growing professionally simply means finding colleagues with whom to bounce ideas around. The Knowledge Loom and companion Workbook present many opportunities to exchange ideas and broaden understanding about effective education practice, whether the colleagues are in the same school/district or across the country.

HOW IS CONTENT PROVIDED?

The database content presented online comes from many places, including professional and technical assistance partner organizations (some funded by the U.S. Department of Education), private developers/providers of educational products

and services, and individual teachers and administrators in schools and districts. The Knowledge Loom regularly develops and spotlights best practice information about topics that concern K-12 educators today. These currently include literacy, equity, technology, math, school organization, community involvement, and professional development. An Web-based administrative interface is provided for content provider organizations to input their information and findings, and link these to appropriate best practices, stories, and resources for appropriate search results. In addition, interactive tools located throughout the web site are available for all users to add their own threads of wisdom and experience to the content.

WHY A KNOWLEDGE LOOM?

The loom as a metaphor suggests a work in progress, a workspace where selected and varied threads are drawn together to craft a cohesive, unique, and useful fabric. The Knowledge Loom web site offers an online workspace where education-minded users can weave distributed threads of information and experience together in such a way as to create a fabric that wears well on their own conditions, needs, and visions for excellence in teaching and learning. The Knowledge Loom provides the content that supports collaborative professional development initiatives.

OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION/DEMO

Online tour of The Knowledge Loom to learn how to access theme-based best practices, success stories, supporting research, and resource links for ongoing professional development and action planning.

Demonstration of the asynchronous panel discussions and other online tools that are part of the suggested professional development activities.

Presentation of The Knowledge Loom Professional Development Workbook and Facilitator Guide as a companion resource that leads participants through a series of online and face-to-face collaborative inquiry activities using Knowledge Loom content.

Unveiling of the new content-partner administrative interface that allows expert content providers (professional and technical assistance organizations, government agencies, and individual schools and districts) to make direct submissions of their content to the Knowledge Loom database.

Audience discussion about the implications of a tool like The Knowledge Loom for effective school change. Sharing ideas about the expansion of the Workbook into an interactive workspace for both small-group and broadcast knowledge sharing and decision-making for effective teaching and learning, and discussion about developing an online course focused on the Workbook activities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From October 1998 through December 2000, the United States Department of Education assigned resources to the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB), a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, to develop a "...sustainable, customer-driven, distributed repository/database of information on best practices in teaching and learning." After talking to many educators, the LAB realized that a "repository" was not enough. Our vision was The Knowledge Loom—a comprehensive electronic environment that moves from information delivery to information creation, from data to people, from a learning library to a learning community. The Knowledge Loom Professional Development Workbook and Facilitator Guide is a continuation of that work—to bring the best-practice content presented on The Knowledge Loom in a practical way to districts, schools, and classrooms through collaborative professional development activities.

REFERENCES

Riel, M. (2000) New designs for connected teaching and learning. *White paper for the U.S. Department of Education: Secretary's Conference on Educational Technology* (<http://www.gse.uci.edu/mriel/whitepaper/learn4.html>).