Virtual Co-Laboratories For Implementing Effective Teaching Strategies In Local Schools

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Abstract

In October 2006, Michigan Integrated Technology Supports (MITS)1 broadened their focus to include universal design for learning (UDL). UDL is a pedagogical framework that seeks to develop flexible goals, methods, materials and assessments to meet the needs of the broadest range of students.

The use of UDL principles in classrooms is a significant paradigm shift for many educators, and affects every aspect of educating students, including but not limited to the way students are taught, the textbooks used, the way students are allowed to show they know the information, state wide assessments, etc… If schools are going to implement UDL it requires systemic changes from the State level, administrative level, in the classroom and even at home with the parents and students.

To help support the systemic change needed for UDL to be implemented, MITS established a referent group of diverse stakeholders, including many from general education, to develop a shared vision for Michigan with regard to meeting the needs of diverse learners. During the referent group's dialogic deliberations in three two-day participative events, called Co-laboratories, the participants identified idealized requirements, barriers, and opportunities for developing learning community models complementary and compatible with the principles of UDL. The Structured Dialogic Design Process (SDDP) was employed to enable the diverse group of stakeholders to use democratic planning to address complex, boundary-spanning challenges at the state level.

The paper discusses the refinement and extension the Co-Laboratory experience from the state level to local school districts through a mixed-presence approach including Internet resources. A streamlined virtual Internet version of the SDDP will enable multiple stakeholders at the local school district to participate in a teleconference and online facilitation for the design of customized teaching strategies. The virtual SDDP will significantly improve the efficiency of producing results by offering busy stakeholders the opportunity to interact at different times from different places. Preliminary estimates indicate that it will also reduce by a factor of six the cost of face-to-face meetings by minimizing travel and per diem expenses for the participants.