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Blended learning in credit recovery

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Abstract

This project is to create a blended learning module for students who need to recover course credit in order to stay on track to graduate on time from a small rural district with limited teachers and face-to-face time. This project will eliminate the need for the district to pay for online credit recovery services and help avoid scheduling issues that may prevent completion of the high school curriculum by students who fail a class. The project will be tested with students within the district and, if successful, will be implemented for all students who need to recover course credit.

Blended Learning in Credit Recovery

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Abstract

This project is to create a blended learning module for students who need to recover course credit in order to stay on track to graduate on time from a small rural district with limited teachers and face-to-face time. This project will eliminate the need for the district to pay for online credit recovery services and help avoid scheduling issues that may prevent completion of the high school curriculum by students who fail a class. The project will be tested with students within the district and, if successful, will be implemented for all students who need to recover course credit.

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Introduction

"Our job is to teach the students we have. Not the ones we would like to have. Not the ones we used to have. Those we have right now. All of them. " Dr. Kevin Maxwell

As a middle school/high school English teacher for 16 years, I have watched students each struggle to earn enough course course credit to graduate on time. Iowa state data shows 91.3 percent of students in Iowa's Class of 2016 graduated within four years, up from 90.8 percent for the Class of 2015. Iowa's annual dropout rate was 2.8 percent in the 2015-16 school year, up from 2.5 percent in the 2014-15 school year. The remaining percentages account for the students still working towards graduation after four years. The state's 2015-16 dropout rate represents 4,154 students in grades 9-12 (www.educateiowa.gov, 2018). I believe that is 4,154 students too many.

Many districts, including my school district, are currently struggling to assist students who have failed core classes to recover those course credit to be able to graduate on time with their classmates. My district does not have the personnel nor the financial resources to hire additional teachers to teach the extra classes necessary for the struggling students to take to earn the number of needed course credit to meet graduation requirements. Our district cannot currently help students recover course credit without having the students repeat entire years of classes. Our district uses a system where one credit hour equals a one semester class. A year long class would then equal two credits.

The district currently employs 15 full-time and 1 part-time teacher at the middle/ high school level. This means that a class may only be offered once during the school day for all students that need to take that class. For example, a biology class that is required for

graduation may only be offered during 3rd hour. Algebra may also only be offered 3rd hour. If a student fails biology but also needs to complete algebra, then they must decide which class to put off for a full year. This choice may result in the student being behind for graduation requirements or not graduating with the needed classes for a post high school educational placement. Each year between two and four students are in danger of not completing the required classes for graduation due to scheduling conflicts when core classes need to be retaken for credit.

The district would like to explore the idea of using a blended learning approach to course credit recovery. This approach would utilize online learning, as we are a 1:1 district, and face-to-face time with teachers. It is believed that a blended learning approach would be more flexible for our students and our staff. If a student could use an online platform during an open period in his or her schedule, then the student could stay on track to graduate. The district would not have to pay for the use of an online platform that may or may not meet the needs of our students.

I propose to create an online credit recovery program with face-to-face components to ensure that students who need to recover course credit have the best chance to stay on track to graduate. The courses would be specific to the Riceville curriculum and the Riceville District's needs. I will research the courses that most students struggle to pass and work with the core teachers to create classes that will work for credit recovery in those areas. I will be the program designer and construct the classes, but the core teachers will supply and assist me with the curriculum specific materials.

Terms to define:

Credit - A credit is the recognition for having taken a course at school or university, used as a measure to determine if enough hours have been made for graduation. (Schorr and McGriff, 2011).

Credit recovery - Credit recovery is a term used to describe a wide variety of educational strategies and programs that give high school students who have failed a class the opportunity to redo coursework or retake a course through alternate means—and thereby avoid failure and earn academic credit. (Partnership, 2013).

Blended learning - Blended learning is any formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace. (Schorr and McGriff, 2011).

The goal of my work is to build a course that embraces blended learning and solid pedagogical practices to assist students who need to recovery course credit in order to stay on track to graduate on time. It is my hope that this course will become a model for other courses in my district that students need to complete for credit recovery.

Literature Review

Methodology

When I started my search for research on blended learning and course credit recovery options for students, I started at the Rod Library online database search engine. I used the search terms “blended learning” and “credit recovery”. I limited my search to publications between 2000 and 2018. I also limited my searched to peer-reviewed and full-text options. I wanted to look at various research methods so I looked for case studies as well as qualitative

and quantitative research. I felt that if I looked at all three types of research, I would have a better understanding or a better big picture of how/if blended learning affects credit recovery efforts by high students.

Benefits of Blended Learning for Credit Recovery

Before I investigated how to overcome the challenges and pitfalls of using a blended approach to recover course credit, I wanted to know if this approach had any advantages or benefits. Most of this research came in the form of case studies and qualitative research with students, educators, and parents self-reporting and reflecting on the learning process.

The online recovery credit classes can be delivered in one of three ways: independent courses, asynchronous courses, or synchronous courses. With a synchronous course, the instructor can deliver materials to all students at once in audio/video forms. Courses can also be delivered as supplemental courses or in a full-time learning environment. One advantage to blended learning credit recovery is the ability for a student to learn through different avenues than previously used. Pettyjohn and LaFrance point out that online instructors should be highly-qualified and trained to deliver engaging content for students (2014). They also state that one of the largest advantages of the online model for credit recovery is the pre-test model. In this model a student is able to take a pretest on a unit. If the student passes the pre-test, then the student does not need to complete the learning unit. Instead, the student can receive credit for the material and move on to other material (Pettyjohn and LaFrance, 2014). This model has great impact for my district. I find that most of the students in my district do not need to repeat an entire course but rather need to complete a unit or section of

a course. This means that students can recover course credit without having to sit through the entire course again, thus expediting the recovery process for the students.

Another benefit identified with the online credit recovery process is access to assistive technologies inherent with online learning. Students reported that the ability to use speech-to-text or having text read to them was a key in the success of that student (Pettyjohn and LaFrance, 2014). Students also reflected that the ability to choose different pathways and having a sense of control over their learning lead to the increased success of credit recovery in students (Pettyjohn and LaFrance, 2014). Faculty and staff also reported numerous benefits to the online credit recovery process. They felt that online courses promoted academic success for students that were otherwise at at-risk (Pettyjohn and LaFrance, 2014). The success that was experienced by the student seemed to transfer to other academic areas as well. This study also reported that staff members thought that students seemed to take more ownership of their learning.. This report did not specify the supports in place for the students or if technology was given to each student by the district. I do not know in what supports the students had at home while completing the courses. The daily class schedule was not disclosed, and I wondered if students had a dedicated time period during the day to work on their courses.

Challenges of Blended Learning for Credit Recovery

Online courses in general have challenges in implementation. A very small study done in Tennessee in 2014 identified that lack of access to technology in rural areas was the biggest barrier to online credit recovery (Holian, Alberg, Strahl, Burgetter, and Cramer, 2014). This study also cited the lack of reliable internet service was a huge barrier to students

trying to recover course credit. This study cannot easily be transferred to my district as we are a 1:1 Macbook district. We are also fortunate to have access to high-speed fiber optic internet service in our area. Therefore, the barrier of access to technology and internet is not a factor for our students.

One challenge identified was the issue of an online class being of equal value to the face-to-face equivalent in a district (Pettyjohn and LaFrance, 2014). Are students who use the online blended learning credit recovery process being cheated out a quality education? Are we pushing students out and through our education system to avoid low graduation rates? These are not necessarily research questions but more reflection question for the district looking to implement such a program.

Students who are behind on course credit in high school will often require additional educational supports in order to achieve academic success. The study by Pettyjohn and LaFrance cited this needed extra support as a challenge to online credit recovery (2014). They stated that once a student experiences academic failure it is difficult to reroute that student (2014). I feel that a district must evaluate why the student failed the course before putting the student into an online blended learning credit recovery program. If the student failed due to learning difficulties, then maybe online learning is not the best option to recover course credit. If the student can do the work but failed the class due to other factors, then online credit recovery may be an option. I would be interested in research as to the reasons why students fail classes.

Students who enrolled in online recovery courses expressed frustration over the lack of teacher support during their courses (Pettyjohn and LaFrance, 2014). Students interviewed

stated that teachers were hard to get in touch with and real time teachers were available only on a limited basis (Pettyjohn and LaFrance, 2014). Students also acknowledged that the choice and control that they liked was also a barrier to completing the coursework. The students stated that they needed teacher support, deadlines, and structure to succeed (Pettyjohn and LaFrance, 2014). In the same respect, the teachers were frustrated that students did not do a better job at seeking them out for support. They reported that students expressed feelings of anxiety and of being overwhelmed during the online credit recovery process. It is apparent to me that when implementing a blended learning credit recovery program, a district must create a plan for student support and have it in place.

Factors for Success in Blended Learning for Credit Recovery

Before I examine factors that contributed to the students who experienced success with online credit recovery programs, I had to look for research on the actual success of online programs. Hughes, Zhou, and Petscher completed a quantitative research study comparing success for credit recovery online versus face-to-face classes in 2015. This study focused on high schools in Florida. They found that students were more likely to receive a C or higher in the online classes more often than in face-to-face classes. However, the study did not rule out other factors in student success such as academic supports, home support, or economic differences in the students.

A case study conducted in 2016 by deNoyelles, Futch, Howard, and Thompson examined “comfort” as a factor in student success in blended learning courses. The term, comfort, refers to how at ease the student felt during the course. It did not imply that the courses were easy in academic rigor. In this study students cited class organization as a

critical factor in student success and comfort in the class. Instructors also noted that staff perceived student organizational skills play into the student comfort and success as well. The students in this study were college-aged and most had previous online course experience. I feel that the previous experience with online classes was an advantage in the organizational skill of the students and therefore the likelihood of the success of the student. Communication was also identified as a key element for the comfort and success of the students. The students expressed that if the teacher could be contacted easily and responded in a timely manner, the students were more at ease. Also, if the coursework and schedule was communicated clearly, the student was more likely to feel comfortable in the class and achieve success. Support of the learner was identified as the third factor for comfort in an online blended learning environment. This often means that the instructor was available for face-to-face online support during a set time frequently enough to assist students.

While this study involved community college students enrolled in online classes for college credit and not high school students working for credit recovery, I feel that this study can be applied to my project. I need to make sure that communication and support are in place for the students trying to recover credit.

Another study by Curtis and Werth (2015) looked at parents as a factor of success with online credit recovery efforts by students. This study used self-reporting interviews of parents and students after completion of a credit recovery course. The students noted that parent availability for monitoring and mentoring students was an important key to the students' success in the course. The students also responded that the parents were key in motivating the students to complete work and stay on track. This study illustrated the

advantage students with supportive parents have over students who do not have parents who support them in their learning.

So far the factors that seem to control a student's success in online learning are not really within the control of the learner. The success seems to depend on the outside factors such as parent involvement and instructor organization and communication. In a study conducted in 2012 in Iowa and Wisconsin by Clements, Pazzaglia, and Stafford, it was found that 71% of high schools in Iowa used online courses for credit recovery. Clearly online credit recovery courses are used by a majority of high schoolers. As an educator, my district and I need to understand what student characteristics foster success in an online classroom.

Models of Blended Learning

In research published in January of 2011, authors Michael Horn and Heather Staker identified and defined six models for blended learning.

Face-to face driver

The first model is identified as the face-to-face driver model. This is a program where a physical teacher is present to deliver the online content to the students on a case-by-case basis. The materials are meant to supplement the face-to-face teaching or provide remediation of the face-to-face materials. This program is often used in a lab setting or in a 1:1 district. Students do not progress as individuals but at a set pace dictated by the teacher.

Rotation Model

The second model is the rotation model. In this model, students rotate between stations on a fixed schedule. This classroom has a traditional space for face-to-face

instruction and a space for the individual online learning. The online learning can use self-paced or teacher-paced materials.

Flex Model

Flex is the third model identified by Horn and Staker in 2011. In this model, an online platform delivers most of the curriculum to the students. The teacher is on-site and in the room to assist individual or small groups of students who have a specific issue or area of difficulty. The authors identified this as the most common model used for credit recovery programs or dropout prevention programs.

Online Lab Model

The fourth model is an online lab. In this case, the materials and curriculum are delivered completely online with an online instructor but students are located in a brick-and-mortar school. A supervisor who is not a licensed teacher is there to oversee the students but offer no content help. The fifth model is a self-blended model. This model is currently used within my district with college credit classes. Here, students have a traditional school schedule but chose to take one or more online classes while other students chose face-to-face classes. These online classes are often college credit classes and offered in an *ala carte* fashion. The student choose the classes that he or she wishes to take. In this model, the students are choosing to blend their traditional learning with online learning opportunities.

Online Driver Model

The final model is identified as the online driver model. In this case the students are remote and all learning is delivered online with no brick and mortar school. The teacher is

remote and would rarely engage in any physical face-to-face meetings. This model is often used by homeschooled students who wish to take a course that is not available to them otherwise.

After reviewing the blended learning models outlined by Horn and Staker (2011), decided to model my project around the flex model. I feel that this model will best met the needs of the students within the district and was identified as the model used for most credit recovery programs. With the flex model, the students can work the courses into the traditional class schedule with losing any additional required credit classes. A certified teacher will be available for support in a physical brick-and-mortar location for all students.

Description

My project involves creating an online course for my district to be used for credit recovery at the high school level. Currently my district pays for an outside company to provide the courses for our students to use for course credit recovery. We have no control over the specific content of the courses. Teachers are left to the mercy of the course choices from this company for students to recover a course credit, but the courses may not align with the material being presented in the classroom. As teachers we are not comfortable with students taking recovery classes for credit that do not actually align with the classes that were failed.

My first task was to decide which course or courses were needed most frequently in the credit recovery process for students in my district. 75% of the course credit that need to be recovered are either English I (freshman English) or English II (sophomore English). The second core area needed for recovery course credit is American government. With a limited

number of actual teachers in the district to teach courses, it is difficult for a student to physically sit in the class to retake an English class and maintain the course load to stay on track for graduation. If an English credit recovery course could be designed to cover the standards in the required beginning English classes, then a student could maintain a face-to-face course load that is on track to graduate on time. The American government class is a little easier for the students to recover as those standards are a much narrower band of standards. American government is very specific and less material is at the discretion of the instructor or school district. Because of this fact, I decided to focus on the English language arts recovery credit class to design.

My second task was to go through the ELA common core standards and identify the most important standards from the core courses to address in a recovery course. I have decided to address the writing standards for my first course. These standards can be found in Appendix A.

For the next step, I approached a colleague to take a hard look at my curriculum and plan to implement it in an asynchronous manner. This teacher is familiar with the students who would be taking the course but is not an English teacher. I know that the actual class is aligned to the standards and educational sound. I was looking for feedback on implementation issues.

Mrs. Warnke is currently a third grade teacher in the district but has taught high school special education previously. I have worked with her for seven years and have co-taught several middle and high school English classes. She raised a concern about the motivation of the students and the lack of structured time. If the current schedule remains, I

can use WIN (what I need) time for direct instruction for these students. WIN time is a short period of time in each day that students can seek out teachers for additional assistance. This would address the concern of structured time with the instructor. Another concern that she had was the inability of other teachers to reteach or help those students enrolled in my class during that time. If the student or students were assigned to this teacher each WIN time, then no other teacher could request time with those students. Would that conflict create further issues with the students falling behind in other classes while trying to recover the English credit. We talked about having a weekly check-in during lunchtime to monitor progress and address any issues face-to-face. This would avoid monopolizing the WIN time for these students.

Mrs. Warnke also raised concern about who would be allowed to take this course. Would any student who needs an English credit be able to take it? Would only students who have failed an attempt at a face-to-face class be allowed to take it? At this point she challenged my responses. I stated that for the purpose of the project and research I was only allowing recovery credit students to take the course. Mrs. Warnke understands the challenges of scheduling classes in our district and questioned why students with schedule conflicts could not take the class. I agreed that conflicts were frustrating and a yearly issue but for this year I wanted to limit enrollment to credit recovery students. If the program is successful and problematic issues are worked out, then the course could be opened to students with schedule conflicts.

My next step will be to design the course. I plan to use the Canvas LMS to host the material for the district. My district does not have a preferred LMS for teachers to use.

Numerous teachers use Google classroom, but I have found that using this platform can be difficult for organizing material. I have found that materials can be lost or hard to find in Google classroom, especially if students are working asynchronously. I have used Canvas for previous classes and appreciate the layout and ease-of-use that this platform affords the learners. The students will have internet access at school but will be able to download documents to the desktop from Canvas for home use if no internet access is available. If this form of credit recovery is successful, then I will have to approach the administration of the district to see if a common LMS platform can be named or purchased for the entire district.

The course will be a semester long technical writing course that will align with the writing standards from both English 1 and English 2 classes. In discussions with administration and other teachers, it was felt that a writing course that focused on workplace writings would be most useful. The course will be a 16-week course in which the students will identify a problem or concern within the school or community to address. The student could complete the course in a shorter amount of time. The supervising teacher will need to approve the issue identified. Next the student will create a resume and cover letter about himself/herself, along with a letterhead for correspondence. The student will need to identify the entity that controls, oversees, or handles the issue that was identified. For example, if the student wishes to add a skate ramp to the city park, then the student would need to find out who controls what is placed within the city park. After identifying the governing body, the student will need to start a professional dialogue with them. This will be done with formal business writing and business email correspondence. The student will be asked to plan three solutions to the problem that was identified. The student will research the solutions. This will

involve researching other communities or school districts and how the issue was handled there. For example, if another community just added a skate park, then the student would need to find out the process that was used, the funding that was used, and any issues that community had. This will involve formal written and email correspondence as well. The student will compile all the information into a physical binder for reference as well as a published weekly blog reflecting on the process during the course. The student will use all the information gathered to write a formal proposal to the governing board to solve the issue. The proposal will be a multimedia presentation and written proposal. The multimedia presentation must be presented by the student in-person to the governing board in order for the student to pass the class. The decision of the board will not have any effect on the student's grade.

After the course has been approved by the district, I will need to run a pilot version of the course. At the start of the next school year, I will have two junior students who will be in need of an additional English course credit. This credit will need to be taken in addition to the junior level English courses. The schedule for the school year for these students would require them to choose between taking a junior level math class, needed for graduation, or taking a face-to-face section of sophomore English to recover the English credit. This is not a choice that a high school junior should be forced to make. With this blended recovery option , the students will be able to stay on track to graduate with their peers. The district has a daily period of time labeled WIN (What I Need) time. No classes are scheduled for this 22 minute time slot. This is a time for students to meet with teachers, receive reteaching, or work with peers on homework. I will request that the students enrolled in the credit recovery class must

meet with me twice a week to monitor the progress, answer any questions, and troubleshoot any issues. It is hoped that this face-to-face meeting twice a week will be the support system that these students need to successfully recover the needed credit for graduation.

The students who decide to enroll in this credit recovery class will need to begin by completing a tutorial module on the Canvas Learning Management System and how to use the platform. The Canvas webpage has numerous tutorial videos that I will place on a Google Classroom page for the students. It may seem counterproductive to post on google classroom if the course is on Canvas, but the students are very familiar with google classroom. I feel that this would be the effective and efficient way to have the students access the videos.

Outcome

If this rollout is successful, then it is my hope that this blended approach for students may be implemented for more than just credit recovery and other credit recovery courses. My district and other small, rural districts struggle to offer the all the courses that students want and need. If we could implement this approach, then we could offer many more courses without the scheduling conflicts that arise with the traditional face-to-face approach. This option would make our rural school district more competitive and more adaptable to the students' needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This process not only provided me with the opportunity to create a method of course credit recovery that is feasible for my district but forced me to reflect on the areas of my courses that may need to be adjusted or modified to meet the needs of all learners. The process of deciding what standards to focus on was a difficult task. It forced me to look at

which sections of the English classes that most students did not pass. This took some time and digging into what the other English teacher and I taught in each course and when in the year it was taught. I also looked at past grades and assignments from each of us. It became evident that the area of Shakespeare and the area of formal writing seemed to be the two areas in which the students who failed the courses had the most difficulty. With this insight, I moved forward to identify which writing standards the course needed to cover. The other English teacher and I learned that the writing standards were the most often failed standards by the students. This reflective process has pointed out to me that I need to address and change some elements in my required face-to-face English classes as well. I will be working to make changes to the Shakespearean unit and the formal research paper that I use for the writing unit.

I hope to use this process to move other classes into the flexible, blended learning LMS platform. I feel that moving more courses to a blended learning model will free up my district to other academic courses or learning opportunities for the students. If this approach proves to be effective, then the district could move to a more flexible schedule and maybe become a school without walls or bells. This could improve the way all students learn in the future.

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Appendix A

The standards addressed:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.6

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate;

synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2

Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5

Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6

Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

ISTE Standard 3

Students critically curate a variety of resources using digital tools to construct knowledge, produce creative artifacts and make meaningful learning experiences for themselves and others.

ISTE Standard 4

Students use a variety of technologies within a design process to identify and solve problems by creating new, useful or imaginative solutions.

ISTE Standard 6

Students communicate clearly and express themselves creatively for a variety of purposes using the platforms, tools, styles, formats and digital media appropriate to their goals.

ISTE Standard 7

Students use digital tools to broaden their perspectives and enrich their learning by collaborating with others and working effectively in teams locally and globally.