

Personal Networks Help Virtual Networks

During a meeting of the US and Canadian based CATCs in San Jose, California, Gay Berryman and Glenn Wright of the Texas based CATC sat down to share their experience inside and outside the Networking Academy on the topic of teacher training and support.

Q: I have noticed that your CATC seems to have a different set up than many of the others here today. Can you tell me a little bit about your CATC?

Glenn: Yes, first of all we are based at the Education Service Center Region 11 in Fort Worth, TX. We support a broad range of subjects at our institution through several departments.



Q: How broad of an education base does your organization support?

Gay: We support K-20. Through our organization, we provide almost everything a K- 20 organization would require. For example, Connect2texas.net is a service we offer to schools in our region. The purpose of this site is to promote programs offered by interactive videoconferencing providers in the State of Texas. It is also intended to

be used by schools and other entities to register for programs from these providers. A typical application of our distance learning program is to assist schools in meeting their needs, for instance, if a small district wants to offer Latin and they do not have a Latin teacher, distance learning can pair them up with a school district that does have that resource.

Q: It sounds as if you are moving beyond the scope of the typical CATC role. In what ways do you see yourselves in a unique position?

Gay: I've never thought of us as a unique CATC. What I am most proud of are the working relationships that we create and maintain. We will knock ourselves out to meet the needs of our schools. On occasion, when schools have lost a teacher, we would go into the school and complete the course for them. If they need help setting up a lab, we will do it. We aren't unique, we are just responsive. Our organization pays to support a server that is used extensively for collaboration. This server supports the ability to set up a class to which anyone, anywhere can connect. Once connected, participants communicate via voice in the online session. During the session you can give control of



the material of the meeting back and forth. See and Share is another tool we use. See and Share allows multiple persons working on a project, to share the document so that all can work on it simultaneously. We are probably one of the largest distance learning centers in Texas.

Q: Distance Learning seems to be your strong suit and that is unique as a CATC. How do you see this as an important role you play?

Gay: We take advantage of the channels set up around us. All the schools are connected so that you can have a meeting, through Elluminate, with video and voice capabilities which allows for a collaborative meeting session. If we are just giving instruction, we may only use voice.

Glenn: We have done more virtual support. Because we are very spread out, we looked at how we can do retooling using those types of tools. The good thing about the video sessions through Elluminate is that you can record them and send people the links to get the content. When a student can't make a meeting and we don't have another one scheduled, they can go to the link at any time and follow the training session.

Q: Do you find that people are very responsive to that type of training?

Gay: The more we offer it, the more people respond to it and use it. We also offer hands-on training to all of our Regionals for Exploration and Discovery 1 and 2 courses. Some people just want the hands on and face to face, then we recorded the online training session using Elluminate. We also use NetLab and make that available to all our Academies.

Glenn: We've done some training face to face and competitions with NetLab, but we only have 2-3 instructors who are regular users of it. However, I see this number growing in the near future.

Gay: Our position is unique. We don't have any other responsibilities. We are just a CATC. We don't have the responsibilities of the Regional or Local Academies. That allows us to strictly focus on the tasks and relationships of the CATC and gives us the ability to do projects with folks like CLI.

Q: How effective is it for teachers / instructors to receive virtual training versus in person training?

Gay: Much better hands on or one on one.



Glenn: Yes, one on one is what we would like but so many people are restricted by travel. So, we asked ourselves “okay, you can’t be here so how can we get you this training?” and came up with an answer to meet that need.

Gay: In general, some people prefer little instruction while others want a lot of guidance. We like to give them options. We talk to our trainees and come up with a solution that best meets their needs. We then re-examine it along the way and readjust if necessary.

Q: Do you think there is a difference between instructors who receive the hands on lab experience and the math teacher who doesn’t have as much hands on lab time in the curriculum?

Gay: I took some hands on math courses with manipulatives and I really needed the one on one hands on time in order to follow the curriculum. If you can visualize the concept in the classroom, it will work and translate much better. Then again, everyone learns differently, so we try to address that. Because of the interaction with other people and seeing how they were problem solving, I had a very robust educational experience.

Glenn: If you are working one on one, you are away from your desk, you are focused, and you don’t have your cell phone. When training virtually you are much more easily distracted and it takes much more self discipline. With in person training you know the trainees are at least getting the basics

Q: What types of metrics does your institution use to measure the success of the programs?

Gay: Our organization is big on measuring the return on investments. They make significant investment in teacher training. So, they have a very definitive data gathering method. Our organization is not funded per se. So, every program we have has to answer to the schools and Academies in our region for the next year’s funding. Schools pay a membership fee for certain programs. They are also charged a fee for the services we offer. Academies pay for our services too in regards to the tools that we use as well as the Academy related training that we offer.

Glenn: Surveys are taken after the completion of every program.

Gay: Evaluating and improving student outcomes is our number one goal, therefore that section of the survey is the most in-depth. We are required to document the percentage of out time that we spend on every initiative. Interaction with parents and students is ranked very highly on those surveys and performance reviews.

Q: Are most of your programs method / pedagogy based or content based?



Gay: It's both. We understand that you really need both and the level of each depends on the individual and their background. We are very reactive when we have to be

Q: What do you think could be improved on the aspects of virtual training or learning?

Gay: Every CATC should have Telepresence

Gay: I really think that the use of these virtual tools will change people's learning methods. It's almost a "have to" philosophy. Training people remotely is necessary. I am holding more trainings that way now than I ever have. It's because we have so few people attending in-class training. We have to train virtually and then follow up with them at certain points. There has to be times when you meet face to face. It puts the monkey on the back of the instructor. We can't spoon feed them. I think virtual training is inevitable and we need to embrace the tools that are available.

Gay: We need to do a better job of educating administrators on the importance of training and professional development needs so that teachers will be given the necessary resources to make virtual learning a success. Teachers give all of their energy to the classroom making it impossible to have any time left over to do virtual training. So while virtual training can be of value, a teacher doesn't have time or energy to devote to it when it's offered.

As virtual training becomes more of a necessity educational institutions will learn how to combine the strengths of in person training with the evolving elements of the online community. Engaging learners from a distance can certainly be challenging, however one factor that makes a difference is the ability of learners to self select these programs through the Service Center. As opposed to required classes those with self selected students will fare much better in the virtual world. However, a strong blend of hands on, face-to-face learning and virtual learning continues to be a winning combination for the level of instructors whom Glenn and Gay equip to serve Networking students across the southern parts of the United States.