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Innovative Online Curriculum Writing: A Practical Approach for Multiple Authors/Multiple Locations

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Innovative Online Curriculum Writing: A Practical Approach for Multiple Authors/Multiple Locations

Abstract

The technology-based writing method described here enabled collaboration from distant locations. A comprehensive and well-integrated 4-H quilt curriculum was the goal. Seven writers used an electronic activity template based on 4-H Cooperative Curriculum System standards. A hyper-linked spreadsheet was developed. Each writer input their writing from the template to their separate sheet, which was hyper-linked to the master spreadsheet. Using FTP client software, all writers had access to updated materials on the master spreadsheet at all times. The writer/editor could see all work, monitor duplicate efforts, and put writing into one voice. A 284-page coherent and comprehensive curriculum resulted.

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Background

Writers today often collaborate from distant locales. This article details the process developed by a group of Extension personnel while collaboratively writing a comprehensive 4-H quilt curriculum. The process proved to be efficient, inexpensive, and easy-to-use.

The writing team included two Extension specialists, a curriculum specialist, and a writer/editor who were housed on the university's campus; and four Extension educators from diverse areas of the state. The review team members were all from distant locations of the state and included two Extension educators, (one who is a quilt shop owner), a 4-H volunteer leader, and a youth 4-H member.

The comprehensive curriculum consisted of five units or "blocks." Each block was made up of up to three skill levels, beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Content specialists were identified to write each of the blocks. There was some "gray area" as to what material belonged in each block. Obviously, redundancy is not efficient, and therefore writers worked together to develop the curriculum outline to avoid overlap.

Writing Method

All team members attended a 2-day meeting where the framework and strategy for writing was

explained. Writers were trained to use an activity template based on a national 4-H juried review process form (Zurcher, 2004). By using the template for writing each level of each block, writers consistently addressed all areas required for the curriculum to be acceptable for national 4-H publication.

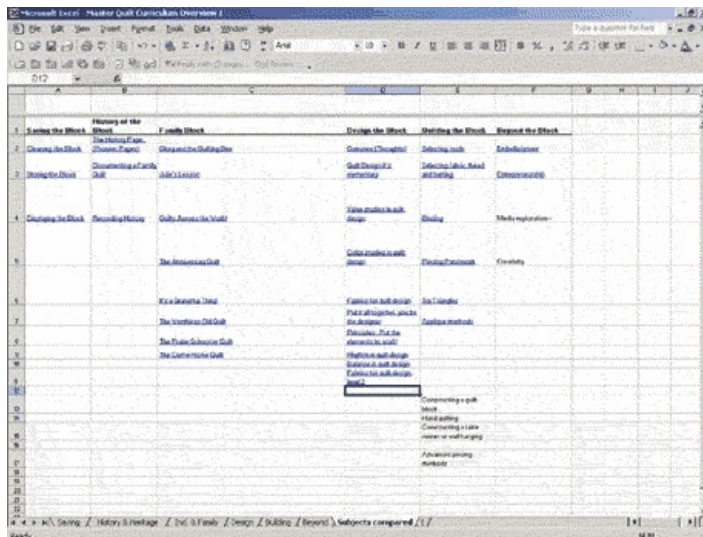
In the beginning, writers met in the computer lab of the College of Education and Human Sciences. It was an ideal place for the curriculum team to gather together and synchronously write the curriculum. During these early sessions, writers saved their files to the same folder. Individual writers could project their work from a central computer onto a screen for reaction from all. The group spent several days writing, reacting to the work, changing writing strategies, and writing more.

Although progress was made, it soon became clear that to write on such a comprehensive topic, many sessions would be required. It was not realistic to expect 10 people from distant parts of the state to get together in the same location for so many writing sessions. Writers realized that in order to make efficient use of time, a method needed to be developed to pass writing back and forth easily while working from distant locations.

A strategy was developed (Vigna, Fairchild, & Donaldson-Fassett, in press) that proved to be highly effective for organizing the vast quantities of paperwork generated by the writing team. The first step was to set up an Excel spreadsheet with separate sheets for each of the curriculum writers. Individual writers were hyperlinked to a master sheet that reflected a compilation of all the work. Each writer's sheet was set up to automatically update the master sheet as components were added. As a writer added a component, it showed up immediately on the master sheet.

Figure 1.

Master Excel Spreadsheet. (Each author is represented by a column. Topics are hyperlinked to individual author's spreadsheets listed on tabs at bottom of screen.)

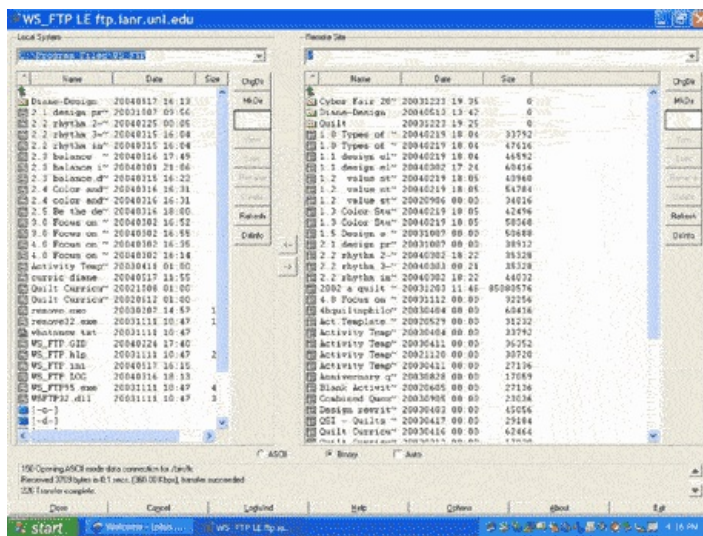


In order to ensure that all writers had access to updated materials, FTP client software was used to move files from computer to computer. All writers were a part of the university system, but not all had access to communication software routinely used by university faculty housed on campus. FTP client software is free of charge; therefore, it was decided that since anyone could use an FTP client from any computer, it would be the easiest and most economical method for transfer and communication between all writers and the writer/editor.

FTP stands for file transfer protocol. FTP client software is used commonly by Internet users when downloading and sharing files. It creates the ability to transfer files back and forth from one computer to another. For more information on the use of FTP client, go to <http://www.ftpplanet.com>. There, one can access various tutorials as well as a beginners guide to FTP client. Two important things to note about FTP client software: it must be installed on the computer, and the computer must have Internet access.

Figure 2.

Screen Displaying Both Files on the Remote Site (right), and the Writer's Local Computer (left). (Arrows in the middle column are used to pass files back and forth.)



After establishing the activity template, the format for writing in the Excel spreadsheet, and the FTP site where the material was stored, each writer was able to write independently. The writer/editor accessed all the writing easily. Writing was organized and consistent. Communication was efficient between writers and the writer/editor who compiled all the material into one voice for the curriculum as a whole. The necessity for group writing sessions diminished greatly once this strategy was put in place. The curriculum team still convened meetings regarding the development of the curriculum, but such sessions were to critique writing, not to create it.

Evaluation

The outcome of this process is a comprehensive 284-page quilt curriculum. It is now available, and the results speak for themselves. The writing process took approximately 2 years, start to finish.

The writer/editor was affected most by this writing strategy. At first, it was impressive to watch the work accumulate in each block. Then, after editing, it was simple to pass the work back and forth between writers for further editing, additions, corrections, and expansion. To communicate with each writer, the writer/editor had only to pass the file to them using FTP and gently nudge them along by way of email messaging. Even the most novice computer operator in the group felt comfortable with the method.

Conclusion

This method was simple, economical, and uncomplicated. Any group of writers could benefit by adapting this process. Activity templates helped all writers address necessary components of the curriculum. Excel spreadsheets helped writers to organize their work. FTP client software allowed writers to give access to their writing to all. Because the technology used is easily accessible, the method is well suited to group writing projects involving diverse stakeholders.

References

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