

# Online Pioneers at APS

## Best of both worlds

## Teaching face to face and online

It's 3:30 in the afternoon when Dane Weiler enters the eCADEMY library. Sunlight streams through the wall of glass to the west. Near the entrance, one student studies alone in a carrel. Across the library, a dozen students work individually at tables.

Dane takes a seat alone at a table near the entrance. She unpacks her laptop and a pink wireless mouse. She flips up the laptop cover. Her fingers begin to flutter over the keyboard.

Class is now in session.

As one of the first online teachers at Albuquerque Public Schools, managing a class of students through her computer is not new for Dane. She and Vickie Kurtz, a teacher at eCADEMY, were the first two teachers to offer online classes to APS students two years ago.

Fall 2011 marks Dane's third year teaching students online. This past summer she began teaching other APS teachers how to teach online.

On this afternoon she needs to work online with both students and other teachers.

First she checks for messages in her Health and Wellness class in Blackboard, the online learning management system APS uses. There is nothing new, but as the end of the six weeks is nearing there have already been about 150 messages between Dane and her students.

Her brow knits as she scans the Blackboard Grade Center. She is concerned about



Dane Weiler teaches full time at Volcano Vista High School and part time at eCADEMY. She is beginning to incorporate parts of her online Health and Wellness class into her traditional class.



some students who are not doing well. She sees one hasn't been in the class for three weeks. On the other hand, the student with an "A" has kept up with every assignment.

Her students are typical in believing they can work in an online class any time they want. In fact, much like a traditional class, the material opens to students as the semester progresses, and there are specific due dates for assignments. A pacing guide in the online course outlines this. "They are cherry picking assignments. They think, 'If I just pass the exam, I'm good.'" That's not good. They didn't get the background knowledge from the other assignments."

"They are supposed to be logging on at least twice a week for a minimum of two hours each time or to reach four hours in a week. We find they can be successful if they do that," she explains.

For each student, she will print a report from the course that details the dates and lengths of time each student was in the

course. That will be mailed home along with the class progress report. In addition, she will call parents of struggling students.

She drops into her e-mail account to see a message from a teacher in the APS Online Teacher Certification course she is teaching assisted by Magdalena Strickland in the APS Instructional Learning Technology office. With a few clicks she returns to Blackboard and opens the teacher's course. "They have a wiki assignment. Some were having some trouble, so I gave them an example and a link to read about. So, we need to reduce their stress level and help them do this."

Tomorrow she will return to her traditional, face-to-face classes at Volcano Vista High School. Her classroom just off the freshmen's commons area looks like many others at Volcano Vista except recently a large metal cart arrived. Students are asking, "What's that big box up there?"

They will soon learn their teacher is



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# Following a blended approach

combining her love of teaching in both face-to-face and online environments.

She is moving some of her Volcano Vista students into a blended environment that combines the best of both worlds. That big cart contains old computers. Her traditional students will begin using some activities that are now only available to her online students. "Best practices," she insists, "transfer back and forth. With well thought out modification, you can take face to face and move it into online and move online into face to face."

## More engaging content

Of her evolving blended classes she says, "This is more engaging because in face to face there aren't the numbers of readily available resources that there are in a blended format. To work in a textbook and occasionally go to a computer lab can be boring." To illustrate she explains how this week her traditional students filled out a printed worksheet to gauge their stress level. Her online students used a web-based, interactive "stress-o-meter."

She expects a period of adjustment as these students start using online material. "I didn't realize how deficient they were in computer skills," she says of her first online students. "I modeled it. Still they had problems navigating. From an academic standpoint, students have difficulty with the internet."

Dane has actually been using a blended approach for some time, but it was necessity -- not choice -- that put her there.

## 'It just evolved.'

"I was an evening school biology teacher at El Dorado High School with no lab equipment. I had 25 biology books in the trunk of my car, but I couldn't take 25 microscopes. I still had to meet standards for the course, and I *did* have a computer lab available. It wasn't much of a jump for me to cover some areas using internet resources," she says. "It was a blended class. I just didn't know at the time that I was doing a blended class."

Later at Albuquerque High she did have a dedicated lab. "But it was going so well I still kept doing the blended thing. It just evolved."

That led to her to join Vickie in the fall of 2009 as the first online teachers in the district at Albuquerque High Evening School, which is now eCADEMY.

You are unlikely to get Dane to commit to which environment is best. "I still enjoy the face to face. When I'm at eCADEMY it's very quiet, which is nice for a while," she says. "But I need a kid face -- being able to look them in the eye, see if they are getting it or they are not."

## Blended advantage for students

She sees this as an advantage for students also. "Students have the best of both worlds. They have the more engaging content available online, and they have *me!*"

Another shared advantage is the ability to access the course from anywhere there is an internet connection. This past summer, Dane managed her eCADEMY online course from Angel Fire. She could hike and fish -- and teach -- from her cabin.

There were challenges. Bad weather would cause her to lose internet connection. Her cell phone filled in. "My students would

text me questions when they couldn't get me on Blackboard." She also made weekly trips back to eCADEMY to visit students.

During the school year she works in a spare bedroom at her home dedicated to online work. "That's all I do in there is Blackboard."

"I do this consistently every day: I log in every morning and check e-mails and messages in Blackboard. I may not respond right away, but I need to know if there are issues. Then I access it again about 2:30 or 3. Then I either come to eCADEMY and help students and grade, or I do it from home."

When she began teaching online, checking her online courses neared an obsession. No longer. "From Friday afternoon until Sunday I am not online. Students might or might not be, but I am not."

Now she is done for the day -- or maybe not. "I might check in later," she says. "I want something to grade. I want something to grade."

## APS moves into the online environment

The APS Instructional Learning Technology (ILT) office is where online began at APS. The first project was to create the Teaching English Language Learners (TELL) online course, which began in Fall 2005 and continues today.

Most ILT staff members were previously classroom teachers and had taken online university classes. In addition, most were instructional designers. They received additional training about online learning from the Regional Educational Technology Assistance Program at New Mexico State University. The staff worked with three teachers at the Career Enrichment Center and with APS departments such as Nursing and the Training Resource Center staff in Human Resources on how to use Blackboard, the district's learning management system.

It was, therefore, a happy set of circumstances when Dave Wells, the principal at Albuquerque High Evening School, began looking for a new way to serve his students. The ILT staff was ready to assist those teachers in learning how to develop and conduct an online class. "How you teach in an online



environment is very different from a face-to-face classroom," said Amy Phipps, ILT Instructional Manager. "In

the summer of 2009 our staff offered instruction to teachers in online foundations and pedagogy."

Two online classes were offered that fall with 40 students. In Fall 2011, almost 2,000 students registered for online classes at Albuquerque High Evening School, which has been renamed eCADEMY to recognize its new approach.

Online in the district has expanded to include more APS departments and use by teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools. The ILT staff continues to support online efforts through instructional design consultation, training, and by facilitating the APS Online Teacher Certification class, which prepares teachers to work in an online environment.