

Online Pioneers at APS

Two teachers, two years Misconceptions and surprises

Two remarkable APS high school teachers are quietly marking their second anniversary as pioneers in online learning. Not only have they now taught hundreds of students online, but they have also taught 60 teachers how to do exactly what they do.

Both were teachers at Albuquerque High Evening School when the school ventured into offering online classes. The demand from students has exploded. In fall 2009, there were 40 students. The next semester, 200. Then 1,400. This past spring, there were 2,000.

While the transformation from Evening School into the current eCADEMY took courage and dedication from school administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents, this is the story of two teachers: Vickie Kurtz and Tess Sanchez.

Years from now when online learning has expanded within the district, we can credit the enthusiasm and unflinching energy of these two teachers for making that possible.

Both will tell you, however, they didn't gladly come to online learning.

In May 2009, the APS Technology



Tess Sanchez, L, and Vicki Kurtz communicate with parents by phone and with students by varied online tools.

Department contracted with New Mexico State University to provide classes for teachers in creating and conducting online courses. "We recognized the fact that teachers needed to know and experience being a **student** in an online environment in order to be a successful **teacher** in an online environment," said Amy Phipps, director of Online Learning Technologies (OLT).

Curiosity brought both Kurtz and Sanchez to those classes, which included 2 staff members from OLT.

They weren't convinced.

Sanchez just wasn't interested. "I didn't understand the terminology." She feared loss of contact with students she so enjoyed in the traditional, face-to-face classroom environment.

OLT then began offering classes for teachers. Kurtz and Sanchez took this class too.

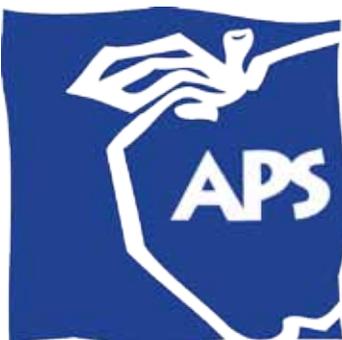
Still they hesitated.

Meanwhile at Albuquerque High Evening School, Principal Dave Wells was looking for a way to better meet the needs of his students. The school changed its focus and re-established itself as eCADEMY. In the fall of 2009 eCADEMY offered 2 online classes to students. Kurtz was one of the online teachers. Sanchez still hesitated.

As eCADEMY moved toward online, Sanchez said, "Everyone was offered the opportunity to become certified and be part of the process of designing the APS online school, eCADEMY, or they could move to another school if this was not for them." Sanchez came onboard that following semester.

Today they will tell you it hasn't been easy. They laugh when they explain how they had the same misconceptions of online learning that students and other

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Teaching students, teaching teachers

teachers bring to them now.

Both thought they would lose contact with their students. Today they cite as their biggest surprise in teaching online the deeper relationships they have with students.

"I learned there were other ways to communicate," Kurtz said. "There's a message center, instant messaging, phone calls, and e-mails to parents. I think the students ask more questions and ask for help more online, because I respond to students 6 days a week. My students are asking me more and they learn that they **can** ask me more!"

Sanchez, who is now teaching at Atrisco Heritage Academy High School, points out how critical teacher presence is in both the online environment and on campus. "You have to be available to them physically as well as online. They have to know they are not out there alone."

Student misconceptions

Students also bring misconceptions of online learning. "They think it's self-paced," Kurtz said. "They **do** have flexible working times, but they are expected to keep up with the class. A lot of them think they can skip the lessons and go straight to the assignments and quizzes." Sanchez sees the same. "They think they can take a course in a week. They don't understand there's a real person who will look at their work and give them a grade."

The students have learned they are responsible for their work and time management. "They have to ask for help when they need it and do it early, Kurtz said. "They can't wait weeks to get help."

What the students discover is now their lessons aren't fleeting. "In an online class they can go back and review a lesson as many times as they want," Kurtz said. "I might close things behind them, such as tests or quizzes, but not content."

Teaching teachers

The teachers had barely settled into teaching their online classes when Phipps asked them to teach and certify other APS teachers in online learning.

Even though the OLT staff had certified two groups of teachers, "We didn't have enough staff to continue to facilitate this," Phipps said. "Teachers who worked in an authentic environment would be better able to communicate with their colleagues. It makes for a much richer experience with the teachers."

"We are not in the classroom," Phipps said. "I have a lot of respect for teachers. They have to be there every day. We don't have to deal with a lot of issues that come along with that. We would never be able to understand and communicate that. Tess and Vickie have years of experience and deal with it constantly."

Teachers' misconceptions

As they began teaching teachers how to work in the online environment, Kurtz and Sanchez certainly weren't surprised at the teachers' misconceptions. It mimics those of students.

"They think that it's easy," Sanchez said. "They don't understand why it's a 10-week course. They're surprised at the amount of work and intensity."

Recounting how a vital part of the certification class is the teacher experiencing being an online student, Sanchez said, "A lot of them just want to immediately go to the design. 'I'm already a teacher,' they say. You have to learn in the environment in order to design it."

Although online teaching is about good teaching, not technology, Kurtz notes there is often also a "technology shock." "It's a different and specific technology," she said. "They haven't experienced that before." They realize as they learn the technology that they will also need to be

able to explain much of the technology to their own students."

These teachers new to online have impressed their online instructors with their ideas and range of knowledge. "These teachers know what their students need to be successful; where student gaps are in their learning. So they can address those as they build their own courses," Kurtz said.

The struggles Kurtz and Sanchez worked through these past 2 years have paid off. Sanchez gets great satisfaction from increased collaboration with her online colleagues; Kurtz revels in the deeper understanding of math she sees her students developing. "Students learn math better, more deeply. They have a better understanding of math. I like developing the courses to find really good online resources to make really good courses."

Just the numbers

Licensing areas	Kurtz: 2 (Math, Science) Sanchez: 2 (Social Studies, Health Education)
Years teaching	Kurtz: 8 Sanchez: 16
Avg. students online per class	Kurtz: 35 Sanchez: 30
Students taught online	Kurtz: 600 Sanchez: 250
Teachers taught	Kurtz & Sanchez together: 60
Online courses taught	Kurtz: 3 (Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry) Sanchez: 8 (Health & Wellness, NM History, U.S. History, World History, U.S. Government, Economics)
Online courses designed	Kurtz: 5 Sanchez: 11