

Austin ISD Teachers Get Serious About Teaching 21st Century Skills – to Themselves.

If you're in the education field, it is likely that a week doesn't go by without hearing, reading or discussing 21st century skills. Teaching 21st century skills in our schools to train students on current technologies and prepare them for their future education or careers is a key point of focus in education. This concept is gaining momentum every day as the importance of teaching 21st century skills is being promoted all over the world, from political arenas to local school boards.

As schools are integrating technology into their classrooms, they are not only faced with the challenges of teaching their student population 21st century skills. In order to effectively pass these skills on to students, teachers and staff members need to be versed in these current technologies. One large school district in Texas has realized the importance of bridging the gap between teacher comfort and competence and classroom integration of technology and has built a program specifically around the issue.

Austin Independent School District, a district of over 5,000 teachers and staff members serving their student population of over 75,000, has a detailed and comprehensive technology plan. Along with goals to enhance student learning through the use of technology, Austin recognizes the need to provide educational opportunities to faculty and staff members to better prepare them for teaching in the 21st century.

In order to address the need for effective technology instruction, Austin ISD began developing online courses. Using ATutor, an open source Web-based Learning Content Management System (LCMS), technology and professional development staffers started to build courses that included detailed course information (objectives, instructions, etc.), robust content and an assessment feature, which could be a quiz, a survey or a project assignment to test skills learned. ATutor also comes equipped with training on how to use the LCMS, for administrators and for learners.

Austin also subscribes to Atomic Learning, an online technology training provider. Atomic Learning offers training (and various curriculum resources) on over 110 software programs, such as Microsoft Office, Appleworks, Adobe Creative Suite and many more. Each application is broken down into small, manageable tasks and each task is explained through a one- to three-minute tutorial movie. This unique training method was designed to help people quickly access Atomic Learning, watch a short tutorial that addresses their issue and to get back to work. As professional development specialist Steve Jeske states, "It fills the needs for knowledge so you can move on."

The professional development team and the instructional technology team at Austin ISD decided to combine these two resources, ATutor and Atomic Learning, to create a unique learning opportunity for faculty and staff members: an effective, flexible and easy-to-use online technology course. ATutor provided the platform that allowed the team to create the structure and assessment, and Atomic Learning provided the content so that the Austin ISD technology staff saved hours of valuable time and resources they would have needed for creating software training from scratch. Instead, the team could focus on higher-level issues.

One of the technology courses that is especially innovative involves Atomic Learning's Lesson Accelerators. Lesson Accelerators are technology-infused lesson plans that combine a subject with a software application. Teachers can have their students create PowerPoint presentations on a period of art, comic books about health and fitness or visual models that illustrate Pythagoras' Theorem. While Lesson

Accelerators are traditionally used in the classroom as student projects, Steve Jeske saw an opportunity to use these resources for teacher education.

The seven-day course, entitled "Independent Study Using Lesson Accelerators," first leads teachers to www.AtomicLearning.com to learn more about Lesson Accelerators and assigns them a tutorial that describes how the projects work. Then teachers are instructed to choose a Lesson Accelerator that corresponds with their curricular area and to follow the step-by-step tutorials to complete the student project.

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**Steve Jeske
Austin ISD**

After completing the Lesson Accelerator just as the example project portrayed it, teachers are then asked to adapt another Lesson Accelerator project to fit their grade level and subject. For example, if the original project had tenth and eleventh grade students creating a PowerPoint presentation on French Impressionism, perhaps a middle school earth science teacher could alter the guidelines and have his or her students create a PowerPoint on the solar system.

The adaptation of a Lesson Accelerator along with the completion of a short survey is the final assessment for the course. The survey also asks teachers to submit comments about the course. The teachers came back with a lot of positive feedback:

Michael U. stated, "The strongest quality that makes this course enjoyable and effective is its self-paced nature. I found that being able to work at my own pace (and to work at times that are convenient) made me put a greater amount of effort into the final project. I also found that by the very nature of Lesson Accelerators, adaptation to different courses, different learning styles, and different modified approaches are very manageable."

"I am impressed because you can learn at your own speed and not feel rushed or nervous about not getting it the first time," says Diane M. "It is a non-threatening learning environment."

When asked how this online course compared to other types of professional development, Steve Jeske said, "This course is actually more demanding than a face-to-face training session. In a seminar or class, you just have to sit there, earn credit and leave. In this course, you have to produce something."

And the course participants agreed: "I liked the fact that this course provides a hands-on learning experience," says Alicia H. "Some online courses require a great deal of reading and reflecting, but no real application. This course maintains a fine balance between the two."

Austin teachers also had incentive to complete the Lesson Accelerators course—they earned a day's training stipend.

Austin ISD plans to continue using and creating more online courses with ATutor and Atomic Learning. "What I like most out of the whole premise is that these tools are filling the needs of *educators*," says Jeske, emphasizing the fact that these two companies specialize in creating products and offering services to the education industry.