Technical Lessons Learned from the Design, Development, and Implementation of a College of Education Accreditation Web Site

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In 2000 the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2000) set the integration of technology as a priority for teacher education institutions. As part of this priority, NCATE is strongly encouraging units seeking accreditation to create on-line electronic exhibits for the purpose of documenting institutional performance relative to the NCATE standards and their elements (NCATE, 2000). While NCATE has not yet made electronic exhibits mandatory, it is asking that institutions of teacher education begin transitioning in this direction as they prepare for impending accreditation visits. The Idaho State University College of Education completed a NCATE and State of Idaho joint accreditation visit in November of 2001. As part of the accreditation review the ISU College of Education designed, developed, and implemented an on-line accreditation web site (http://www.ed.isu.edu/accweb). From inception of the accreditation web site through the site visit by NCATE and the State program approval team, over a year of planning, design, and development occurred. This paper presents a brief perspective on how institutions can prepare for a NCATE/State accreditation visit, reasons for implementing an on-line electronic accreditation web site, and development of a team. It also addresses the lessons learned during the yearlong preparation and development of the ISU College of Education's NCATE and State accreditation web site.

Traditionally, institutions of teacher education have created a physical space, typically referred to as the Exhibit Room, containing all the paper documentation illustrating their compliance to and alignment with the accreditation standards (Samaras, 1998). While Exhibit Rooms are assembled prior to the NCATE and State review, most are disassembled after a visit.

What happens to the volumes of documents and exhibits assembled and indexed according to the NCATE and State standards after the accreditation visit? Do all of the documents go into boxes and files to be stored away until the institution faces another joint review five years later? Or, does the college follow the suggestion of Samaras, (1998) who

said, "It is clear that empowerment for a successful joint visit comes from being proactive not reactive" (p. 70). These questions are important because they point to the issue of accessibility to the documentation and exhibits.

A proactive approach would involve the ready and easy access to accreditation documentation and exhibits at any time during or between accreditation visits by all stakeholders (NCATE, 2001). To accomplish this NCATE suggests the creation of an Electronic Exhibit Room (EER). "Electronic exhibit rooms support the continuous updating of information that is important to your unit. Electronic exhibit rooms also serve as a common and accessible repository for that information" (p. 1). The conversion of the traditional paper document room into an electronic exhibit room that is an accreditation web site allows institution officials, faculty, partners, and community stakeholders instant and continual access to accreditation documentation for evaluation, review, and changes during the five year interim between joint accreditation visits.

In their *Assessment Monograph* on the rethinking of teacher preparation, the Idaho State University College of Education Assessment Committee (2001) stresses that teachers must not only reflect on the impact of their practices on student learning but also on the implications for future practice and professional development. This applies, in a similar fashion, to an institution of teacher education: Should the teacher education unit reflect on its practice of preparing educators, as well? If so, the NCATE/State joint accreditation visit could be the culmination of five years of proactive reflection and continuous improvement.

Once the EER web site is in place, it becomes an easier process to periodically review, evaluate, and update documents that are not only germane to the continuing accreditation process, but, more importantly, demonstrate the overall quality of the institution's programs at any given point in time. Samaras (1998) lends support to this concept:

> Proponents of the accreditation process maintain that continuing self-study is essential to improving the status of the profession, and that every institution should not only have structures in place to ensure continuing program evaluation, but should also be prepared at any time for site evaluations (p. 71).

There are several important issues an institution should consider before making a commitment to developing and implementing an accreditation web site or an EER prior to their next joint visit. It is important to remember the electronic exhibit rooms are elective

and not required as part of the accreditation process (NCATE, 2001, p. 1). Another issue
is indicated by Samaras (1998), " the process for joint reviews is a developing and
unprescribed one"(p. 70). By being proactive, the institution takes the lead in the
continuing accreditation process, while being reactive puts the institution in the position of
following a *developing and unprescribed* process. "All too often, universities follow
reactive paths in planning the accreditation visit and get caught up in the technical aspects
of the visit" (Samaras, 1998, p. 70).

As an institution moves forward on the development of its accreditation web site
and the EER, the formation of a team of individuals to research, plan, produce, and
implement it is a critical first step. "Successful multimedia development, more than most
other types of software development efforts, requires a unique combination of skills and
talents" (Hillman, 1998, p. 215). As Mosley (1997) indicates:

> A team is a relatively small number of employees who are organizationally
> empowered to establish some or all of a team's goals, to make decisions about how
> to achieve those goals, to undertake the tasks required to meet them, and to be
> individually and mutually accountable for their results (p. 267).

It is critical to realize that the production of an accreditation web site and an EER,
along with the preparation of an institution for an upcoming NCATE and State joint review
are beyond the capabilities of just one person. It takes a team of people, each with unique
talents. Ultimate responsibility of the accreditation process resides with the Dean of the
College of Education. At ISU responsibility for the accreditation process was delegated to
the Associate Dean of the College. The Associate Dean, in turn, selected an instructional
designer. The team consisted of only two members during the research, planning, and
designing process. When document creation began, a clerical member was added to assist
with word processing. When publication of the EER web pages to the College's home page
was needed, a technical expert was added. Finally, when the accreditation web site and the
EER began to have sufficient structure and content, the Dean of the College of Education
was added to the team as an important formative evaluation component and subject matter
expert.

Lessons Learned

The lessons listed below address the technical aspects of creating the accreditation web site.

1. Allow for sufficient time prior to the NCATE site visit to plan and develop the accreditation web site. The ISU College of Education worked diligently for twelve months on their accreditation web site. Sufficient time will also allow for on-going formative evaluation and feedback to occur during the planning, design, and development of the web site.

2. Assemble a team of experts. The ISU College of Education team consisted of a content expert, an instructional designer, a clerical member, a multimedia author, and a technical systems expert. The content expert was responsible for the drafting of all the accreditation documents and insuring that the content addressed each NCATE or State standard or their elements. The instructional designer was responsible for drafting the team's analysis and planning into flow charts of how the web site would be structured and linked. The clerical person word-processed, collated, and assisted in the editing of documents. The multimedia author formatted the flow charts into the web site. The technical systems expert maintained the server.

3. A systematic approach to the process is important (Romiszowski, 1988). In other words develop a plan. A plan that includes analysis, development, design, implementation, and evaluation. The ISU College of Education chose to utilize an instructional design model (systems approach) to develop their accreditation web site, because it provides a format, sequence, and structure to the plan.

4. Design and format the accreditation web site around NCATE and State standards. Utilize NCATE and state terminology in content development. This alignment with standards will enable recognition of the structure of the web site and its content by the NCATE Board of Examiners (BOE) and State reviewers. In the examples below (Figure 1 and Figure 2) the NCATE main menu is a reflection of the structure of the NCATE and State standards.

Figure 1. The NCATE Standards menu.

Figure 2. Menu for selection of State Standards pertaining to a specific program.

5. Be consistent, for example utilize only one computer platform, (e.g., Mac or PC) one word processing program (e.g., Word or WordPerfect), and one web development program. Also, be consistent in the creation of file names, file structure, and navigation links (see Figure 3). Because the number of documents linked to the web site can number in the hundreds, the file structure for each page on the web site should utilize a logical structure. Also, create a graphic that symbolizes your institution and use it consistently throughout the web site.
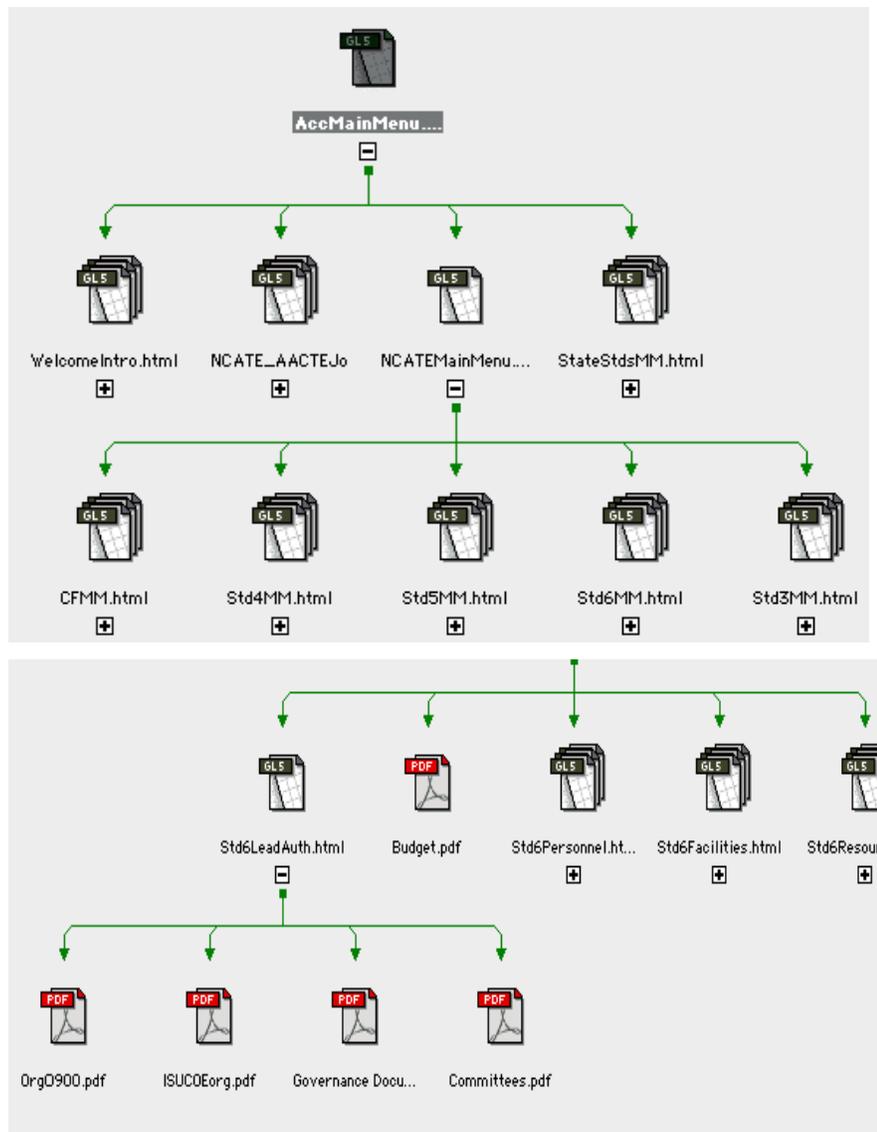

Figure 3. File structure for the NCATE web site.

6. Utilize good web design principles, such as a default font (e.g., Times New Roman) that will display properly on a variety of web browsers. Use light or white backgrounds with a contrasting font color. Use a consistent location for navigation buttons. Minimize the use of graphics on the pages to avoid lengthy download times for some visitors. Avoid cluttering the web pages. In other words, keep them simple. Figure 4 illustrates these principles as applied to the ISU College of Education s accreditation web site.
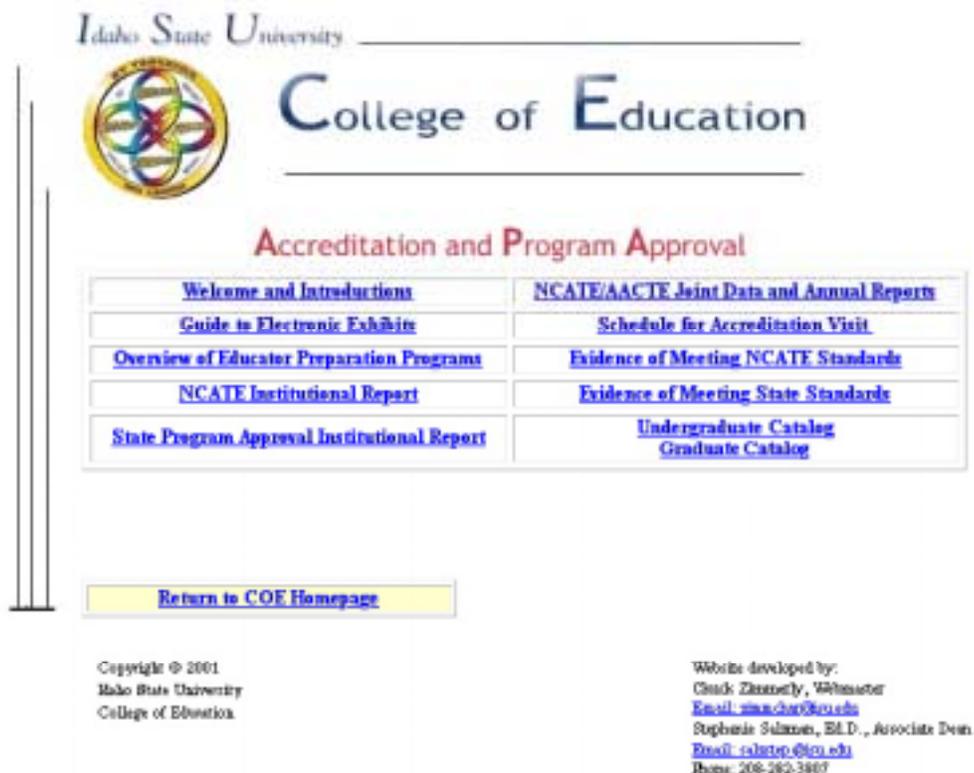

Figure 4. Principles of design in practice.

7. Make it easy to find the accreditation web site from the college or school of education home page. On the institution's home page there should be an obvious graphic or text (see Figure 5) that will link to the accreditation web site.

Figure 5. Provide a clear link to the accreditation site.

8. Because much time and effort will be used to produce the documents on an accreditation web site, be sure to utilize a server that has fault tolerance, meaning the server has more that one hard drive to backup the web site. The loss of months of hard work would be disheartening for the team.

9. Convert documents to a PDF format. This insures that the documents will stay in the format (fonts, page breaks, etc.) in which they were constructed. PDF converted documents will also maintain their format when printed.

Putting together an accreditation web site can take a great deal of time and effort, but the advantages of the electronic exhibit make the effort worthwhile. Following these simples steps designers of accreditation exhibits can develop attractive and functional exhibits that will make the accreditation process more successful.

Contributors

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