

Learning without bounds.

Digital Learning Commons 4507 University Way NE www.learningcommons.org
Corbet Building Suite 204 Seattle, Washington 98105 Tel 206-616-9940 Fax 206-616-4595



Digital Learning Commons

Digital Learning Commons

2005-06 Annual Report

July 1, 2005 to June 30, 2006

Prepared by the Digital Learning Commons Staff
September 2006

Summary

The 2005-06 school year was a period of transition, growth, and continued success for the Digital Learning Commons (DLC).

The DLC moved out of the proof-of-concept phase, where schools participated at no charge, and into a cost-sharing model, where school fees joined funds from the state of Washington and private foundations to ensure that the DLC will continue to provide access to high-quality educational resources to students and educators in the state. The DLC also modified the types of support and training delivered to schools, transitioning from a “point-and-click,” “one-size-fits-all” model to a more consultative and customized approach focused on assisting schools in using DLC resources to advance student achievement.

This year—the third year of operations—saw significant growth, as the DLC moved from serving 65 schools to a total school count of 96, with a population of 41,990 students and educators. Along with the growth in participation, the DLC added new resources in a number of areas, including additional teaching resources, more flexible online courses, more resources aimed at K-8, and resources focused on helping students pass the WASL exam. These new resources increased the use of resources, which rose 28% from last year.

Among the measures of success for the year, the most notable were the results of an external evaluation conducted by Fouts and Associates to study the impact of the DLC’s online courses on graduation rates and college readiness in Washington State. The results showed that one-third of seniors in 18 DLC-participating schools who took online courses would not have graduated without them. Furthermore, 32% of students took courses at the advanced level and 26% of those courses could help students earn college credits.

Perhaps the most satisfying measure of success is hearing stories from DLC participants. One participant, Elisabeth Silver from the Enrichment Cooperative in Spokane, said the DLC “opens up doors for kids that wouldn’t otherwise be open. For our group of kids it’s opened up a rigorous learning environment that they have not necessarily had the opportunity to experience.”

Making a difference

The Digital Learning Commons exists to help schools improve student achievement. The 2005-06 school year brought about encouraging results in meeting this goal: DLC online courses have helped improve graduation rates and college readiness. And the DLC is succeeding in its mission to improve access to online educational resources for students and educators across Washington.

DLC online courses improve graduation rates and college readiness

The DLC—with the support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—engaged Fouts and Associates to study the impact of the DLC’s online courses on graduation rates and college readiness in Washington State. The results showed that *one-third of seniors in 18 DLC-participating schools who took online courses would not have graduated without them.*

Of those students who would not have graduated without taking DLC course(s):

- 45% needed extra credits to graduate.
- 26% made up classes for previously failed courses.
- 24% had scheduling conflicts.
- 5% opted to take core classes at a higher level.

Students also used online courses to prepare themselves for college. Out of all the courses taken, 32% were at the advanced level and 26% could help students earn college credits. More than half of the students who were college eligible took DLC classes to become more college prepared. The disaggregated data show that 61% of the students who were college eligible took at least one advanced-level DLC course and that 48% took at least one DLC course that could help them earn college credit (i.e., Advanced Placement [AP] courses).

DLC provides access to resources that are not otherwise available

According to the Fouts and Associates evaluation of DLC online courses, approximately 76% of the courses were not otherwise available. These courses primarily consisted of electives or advanced classes, such as AP physics or personal finance. Of all the students who needed the DLC course(s) to graduate, approximately 55% chose to take DLC course(s) that were not available at their school.

Beyond online courses, educators and students tend to gravitate to high-need subject areas like math. According to DLC usage statistics, fifty-five percent of users of the supplemental curriculum resources used the math subject-area resources.

Because Advanced Placement courses are often not available, especially in more rural and remote schools, AP content is popular as well. Eighteen percent of supplemental curriculum users made use of AP subjects. In three years of offering online courses, 12% of courses were taken at the AP level.

Foreign language courses have also filled an unmet need. In 2005-06, 36% of online course enrollments were in foreign language courses. These courses help students meet graduation and college eligibility requirements.

Beyond the statistics, participants also speak to the ways in which DLC resources fulfill a need in schools. Catherine Laflin, a teacher at Orcas Island High School, said of online courses: “We’re serving the edges of the bell curve mostly, the students that want accelerated classes and AP classes that we just don’t have the funding for, or students who are struggling along and need a change or an alternative from what’s offered in school. I view [online courses] as keeping those kids on both ends in school, providing options for pursuing personal goals, and helping them get into college.” Sherry Hahn, former technology director at the White Salmon Valley School District, added that DLC online courses “provide opportunities, especially to small and rural schools, like ourselves, that we can’t offer to students because we don’t have the staff to do it.”

2005-06 Online Course Registrations

Subject	Registrations	Levels/Types	Registrations
Arts	8%	Credit Recovery	9%
Business	3%	Advanced Placement	10%
ESL	<1%	College	<1%
Foreign Language	36%	Honors	4%
Language Arts	13%	Pre-AP	<1%
Lifeskills/Health	2%	Standard	76%
Math	17%		
Science	6%		
Social Studies	10%		
Occupational /Technology	4%		

Impacting the classroom

The Digital Learning Commons resources have also impacted classroom teachers. In a DLC survey conducted in spring 2006, educators reported that:

- 63% of educators believed students show a greater interest in learning when using online resources. Judy Deignan, a teacher at West Seattle High School, echoed this: “[Students are] just much more engaged in learning than when they sit at a desk with paper and pencil.”
- 77% of educators thought that integrating online resources into the curriculum improved student learning. Foster High School science teacher Tim Renz is using DLC digital tools in his classroom, and has seen a big impact on his teaching and his students’ work: “I think they’re learning more. For conclusions, before I would get paragraphs. Now I get a couple of pages. They’re really striving to do their best work.”
- 74% of educators found it easier to accommodate different learning styles and abilities through the use of technology. George Ramsey, a teacher at North Kitsap PAL, uses digital tools because they allow him and his colleagues to address a spectrum of learning needs: “Every kid is different, so it helps to differentiate instruction.”

Across the range of resources provided by the DLC, the results are showing that these resources *do* improve learning and teaching.

Increasing use of the resources

DLC usage statistics continue to rise

As the number of schools served has grown, more and more students and educators within those schools have made use of DLC resources. The average number of times a DLC resource was accessed per day rose 43% from 2004-05 to 2005-06. Adjusting for the higher student population in 2005-06, the year-to-year increase was 28%. The average number of unique users accessing DLC resources per week increased 68% from year to year (adjusted for the higher student population).

During the 2005-06 school year, the DLC website had 224,910 visitors who viewed 1,083,167 pages.

Library, teaching resources, and mentors are in demand

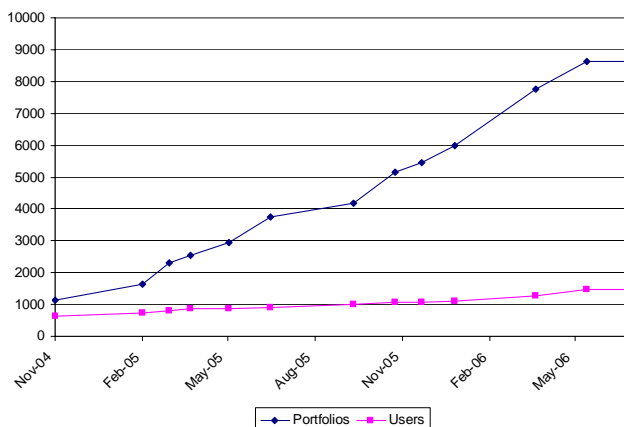
The DLC’s library resources remain popular. Over 80% of educators responding to the DLC’s spring 2006 survey indicated that they had used the library resources. Over 40% of educators reported using DLC teaching resources. An analysis of DLC website logs supports this finding: there were frequently more resources accessed by educators from this section than any other.

The DLC’s Student Mentors—college students who tutor high school students via email—exchanged over a thousand emails with 75 students during fall semester and 60 students during spring semester. Questions about foreign language courses made up 38% of the total correspondence, bested only by humanities-related questions at 45%. Students from nearly half of the schools offering online courses participated in the Student Mentor Program.

More students make use of digital tools

More students are creating online portfolios to store their work, support and enhance learning, and help fulfill state graduation requirements; the number of portfolios per user has also skyrocketed.

Digital Tool Usage



Working to mitigate a barrier to online courses

The 2005-06 school year marked the first time schools were responsible for the cost of online course registrations. As a result, the number of registrations fell 75% from 2004-05 to 2005-06. At the same time, the number of schools that participated in the online course portion of the DLC’s program rose from 42 in 2004-05 to 52 in 2005-06.

In order to ease the transition from the pilot phase, where online course fees were paid for entirely by the DLC, the DLC allocated monies (Course Credit Funds) to each eligible school. These funds allowed schools to enroll students at no charge until they exceeded their allocation. Approximately half of participating schools spent above and beyond their allocation, showing that demand does exist; however, cost remains a barrier for many schools.

Transitioning to sustainability

Expanding the DLC’s impact

The 2005-06 school year marked a transition from the “pilot” phase of the Digital Learning Commons to the “implementation” phase. During the two-year pilot phase, participating schools did not pay to access resources, courses, or training. Starting with the 2005-06 school year, schools began to pay a low membership fee as well as some online course costs. Seventy-two percent (47 out of 65) of schools decided to pay the DLC membership fees for 2005-06 after having received the services at no charge during the prior year. This high retention rate speaks to the value of DLC resources and services.

The DLC was also successful in attracting new members for the 2005-06 school year. Forty-nine new schools joined, for a total school count of 96. In total, the DLC served 41,990 students and educators during the year.

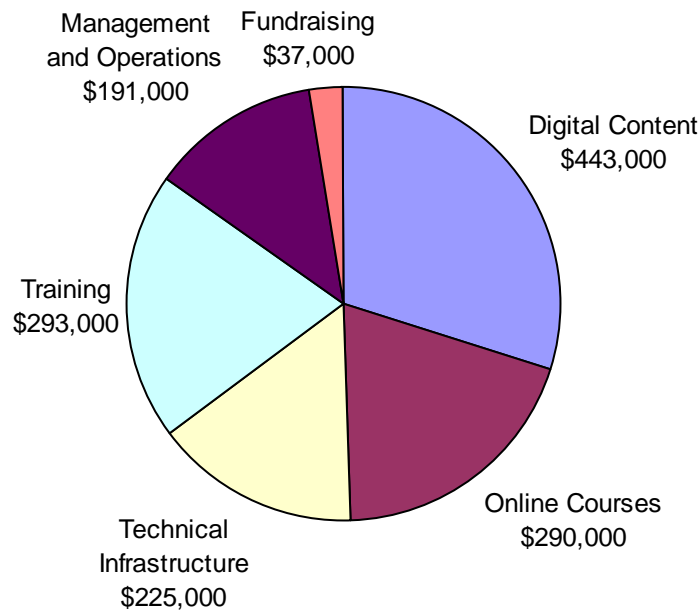
	Schools	Students and Educators
2003-04	17	5,000
2004-05	65	35,000
2005-06	96	41,990

Growth in the number of schools served helps ensure a healthy and sustainable mix of revenue sources, with the revenue generated from school memberships joining Washington State funding and private fundraising.

2005-06 financial performance

The total revenues were \$1,393,600 and the total expenses were \$1,479,000. Total net assets at the beginning of the year were \$427,600 and at June 30, 2006 were \$342,500. Total assets at June 30, 2006 were \$452,700.

The chart below details the actual expenses in the major program categories.

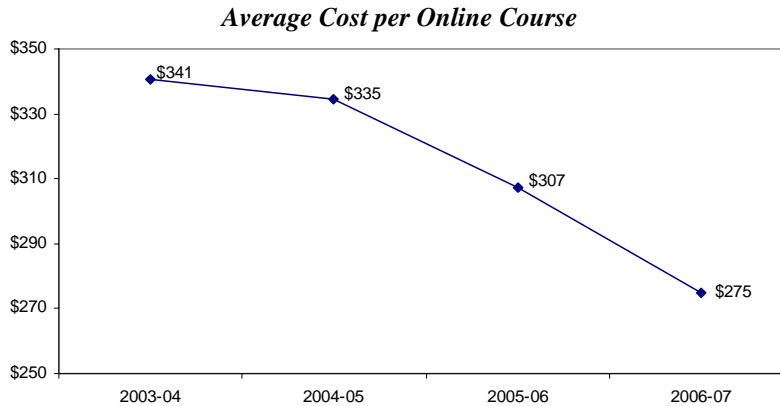


DLC is financially sound

The Digital Learning Commons bolstered its financial stability during 2005-06. Sound financial management, with the addition of several new policies and procedures, enabled the DLC to establish a reserve fund. Since this was the first year of collecting membership and resource fees from schools, the accounting staff set up billing and receiving procedures to ensure that 100% of fees were collected. And, as in the past, the external audit was completed successfully with no findings.

DLC saves schools money

The DLC's continued growth is predicated on providing schools with cost-effective resources and services. The DLC has continued to save schools money and actively works to drive down costs. During the 2003-04 school year, online courses (excluding college-level courses) through the DLC cost an average of \$341 per enrollment. By aggregating demand, the DLC has been able to lower the cost of courses each year. During the 2005-06 school year, the average dropped to \$307. For 2006-2007, the average cost dropped to \$275—a 20% reduction overall. The lower cost helps alleviate a major barrier to students being able to take advantage of online courses.



The DLC is able to drive down costs by working with increasing numbers of students and educators. Based on 2005-06 DLC membership, schools across the state saved over \$1.6 million compared to market prices.

	DLC Cost	Market Price	Difference
Library Resources	\$212,133	\$817,600	
Courses	\$420,000	\$540,000	
Online Curriculum	\$35,000	\$60,000	
College and Career Tools	\$32,600	\$54,600	
Digital Tools	\$40,000	\$250,000	
Training	\$280,000	\$520,000	
Tech Infrastructure	\$250,000	\$650,000	
Totals	\$1,269,733	\$2,892,200	\$1,622,467

Expanding resources and functionality

The DLC was initially created with extensive input from participants, and the organization has not strayed from the commitment to listen and react to participant feedback. As a result, the DLC continues to add additional resource options and tune the website to better meet participants' needs.

A more functional website

The DLC website underwent a redesign during the summer of 2005. The changes were designed to make the site easier to navigate, and also allowed for some significant new features, including a search engine for library databases.

The library search engine is designed to search within the DLC library databases and return search results in a single screen. This makes the DLC library as easy to use as well-known Internet search engines like Google or Yahoo, but also ensures that students and parents access high-quality educationally-relevant resources.

Online courses are more flexible

Participants have expressed a desire for additional flexibility in online course scheduling. As a result, in fall 2005 the DLC expanded its online course offerings to include credit recovery courses. The credit recovery model allows students who have previously failed a core-area course to retake the course without having to repeat content already mastered.

Focus on the WASL

Now that high school students must pass the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) to graduate, preparing students for the exam is a major focus of many schools. The DLC responded to this need by adding a number of WASL-specific resources during 2005-06. In the Teaching Resources section of the website, the DLC added Accelerated Learning Plans (ALPs), a resource that helps prepare students for the seventh-grade Reading and Math sections of the WASL. During summer 2006, the DLC also released newly developed WASL prep and remediation courses, aligning to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) WASL content guidelines.

More resources for teachers

The DLC's Teaching Resources section underwent expansion during 2005-06. Prior to the start of the school year, the DLC expanded access to all of the ClassTools products, a series of supplemental curriculum materials. These resources joined a growing Teaching Resources section, which also includes Beyond Books, ALPs, and Marco Polo, among others.

Prior to 2005-06, the DLC offered a limited set of resources for educator professional development (outside of the DLC's own training). During 2005-06, the DLC added two resources to the Professional Development section of the website. The first is a series of online workshops featuring content from Annenberg, an authoritative leader in professional development for educators. Thanks to a partnership with Western Washington University, educators can earn clock hours for participation in these workshops. The second resource is *Teacher Quality Digest*, a magazine that features concise articles on research and best practices for teachers.

Expanded resources for K-8

Finally, feedback from elementary and middle schools that participated in a pilot indicated that the existing resources didn't fully cover the needs of K-8 students and educators. In response, the DLC took steps to add an elementary and middle school library database to the offerings for 2006-07. This database joined a number of elementary resources to help make the DLC a one-stop shop for K-12.

Customizing support for schools and educators

2005-06 was a year of transition from a "one-size-fits-all" training and support model to a support system customized for each member school. In previous years, the DLC focused on providing overview trainings for all teachers and students within a school. Based on feedback from those training experiences, the DLC modified this model to be more flexible to meet the needs of each member school. This flexibility included an expansion in the types of trainings the DLC offers, adding a variety of in-person professional development options as well as online workshops.

This new model includes the following features:

- When a school joins (or rejoins) the DLC, the first step is to send a DLC staff member to the school for an on-site planning meeting, called an implementation meeting. Ninety-eight percent of member schools had an on-site planning meeting this past year. The meeting focuses on the school's goals and concerns, and allows DLC staff to craft customized training plans for each school based on those needs.
- Depending on need, additional training occurs during the year, including training for an entire staff or department, or a smaller group consultation. The DLC conducted over 200 in-person trainings during the year. These events were a key part of the DLC's overall support to schools, and vital to

successful implementation of DLC resources within a school. Based on post-training surveys, 93% of participants rated the trainings good/excellent; 80% said they felt equipped to use the resources on their own; 78% stated that without training, they would not be able to integrate online resources into their classrooms.

- The DLC added a series of online workshops covering a variety of topics. These workshops allowed participants to receive in-depth information in a specific resource area. During the year, over 50 online/phone-based trainings were held.
- The final aspect of the support model includes specialized trainings for specific roles, notably the school-based online course support staff. In November 2005, DLC staff began offering phone orientations in an effort to prepare school-based members for registration and the “getting started” steps for online courses. As of June 2006, a total of 20 sessions have been conducted for 25 course support team members. These sessions, in addition to other support material such as the new “getting started” demos for each course provider, helped provide successful start-ups for students and school-based Teacher/Mentors.

The transition to this new support model proved successful for both the DLC and member schools. As the DLC moves into 2006-07, the support model remains essentially the same.

Guiding participants to relevant resources and successful experiences

An important aspect of the support the DLC provides is offering guidance and assistance to participants. During 2005-06, the DLC compiled a number of best practice documents, created guides that align resources with pressing topics such as the WASL exam, and formalized the methods used to communicate this type of information to participants.

Sharing best practices

DLC staff documented best practices gathered from educators, students, and resources in the online course arena. These best practices address the different roles played by students, school-based support staff (Registrar and Teacher/Mentor), and in-school administration. While each school has the freedom to implement its online course program in the way that makes the most sense for that school, the best practices document lays out vital information and important questions that all participants should address. The document also helps inform the course support orientation and training activities conducted by the DLC.

The DLC worked with a number of school librarians to identify best practices for the use of DLC library databases, and they are presented as ten tips for librarians, along with a number of quotations and stories detailing how each resource has helped them.

Aligning resources

DLC staff has also aligned all of the various resources and tools to the following important topics:

- Current educational initiatives originating from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), including high school graduation requirements, the state technology plan, alternative education, and advanced placement, among others.
- The WASL exam. This alignment highlights how DLC resources can help educators and students both in preparation for the WASL or in WASL remediation.
- Topics of interest to special education teachers. Many DLC resources have features that make them suited for use with students in special education programs.

Spreading the word

Finally, 2005-06 saw an expansion of the DLC's efforts to communicate with educators in member schools. Specific activities included:

- A monthly newsletter for educators to keep them up-to-date on DLC resources and provide guidance on using the resources. Ten newsletters were sent during the year.
- A series of "success stories," short articles outlining how educators have successfully used DLC resources in their classrooms. Eleven of these stories were published throughout the year, providing members with examples of peer success.
- The "highlight" section of the website, a series of fifteen short articles pointing to the new or notable on the website.

In addition, the DLC distributed handouts designed to be printed and distributed to all teachers in a school. These incorporated many of the best practices outlined above, including the DLC's WASL-related resources.

Monitoring the quality of all resources

The Digital Learning Commons plays an important quality-control role. Beyond simply providing access to online resources, DLC staff work closely with participants and providers to ensure that the resources are relevant and high quality. With that in mind, the DLC undertook a number of projects during 2005-06 to ensure resource quality.

Course provider evaluations

Using noted rubrics from the field, DLC staff developed a thoroughly detailed online-course-provider evaluation rubric, touching on indicators of high-quality online instruction and course design, effective student support, appropriate uses and support of technology, staff development and certification, and administration. This rubric formed the basis of a series of course provider evaluations. In November 2005, five course providers participated in a self- and panel-evaluation of their programs. The evaluations included participation from school-based participants with experience supporting students in DLC-provided online courses. The results of these evaluations prove that DLC online course providers meet high-quality standards in providing excellent online educational opportunities.

In March and April 2006, DLC staff met with more than 20 students from three schools to gather important insight into student expectations of and experiences with online courses from the DLC. Students represented a homeschool program, a small rural high school, and a mid-sized rural high school from various locations across the state. The findings from these focus groups have been incorporated into the DLC's course support program.

Feedback from users

Beyond online courses, the DLC has reached out to participants to ask for feedback on each resource offered on the DLC website. The DLC launched a feedback system during the 2005-06 school year to allow website visitors to rate and review each resource. Reviews and ratings are available to others, allowing visitors to judge the relevance of each resource before trying it. This project continues in the spirit of actively seeking participation from users in the creation and evolution of the DLC.

The DLC's quality-control role does not go unnoticed by member schools. Dean Stenehjem, superintendent at Washington State School for the Blind, said, "The DLC has done a good job of weeding out resources that aren't very good. And believe me, we as a school don't have the time to do that."

Outreach

The Digital Learning Commons does not exist in a vacuum; therefore, the DLC works closely with schools, partners, and the community to improve student achievement.

Throughout the year, the DLC has stayed connected with many of the other organizations involved with education in the state, including:

- Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).
- The nine regional Educational Service Districts (ESDs).
- Grant programs such as GEAR UP.
- Education associations, including the Washington Education Association, the Association of Washington School Principals, the Washington State School Directors Association, the Washington Library Media Association, the Washington School Counselor Association, and the Washington Association of School Administrators.
- Washington State legislators.
- College of Education at the University of Washington, Western Washington University, and the Evergreen State College.
- Nonprofit and community programs.
- Seattle City Council (the DLC reported to the council during a special event held September 13, 2005).

While most of these involved face-to-face meetings, the DLC also keeps partners abreast of current developments through e-newsletters.

DLC staff are also active participants in regional education conferences. In 2005-06, the DLC presented and/or exhibited in 12 conferences and attended 13 conferences.

The DLC also reached out to schools who have not yet joined. DLC staff conducted 20 regional informational meetings during spring 2006.

A number of special projects focused on the DLC's "equity agenda," helping to ensure that all schools have equal access to quality online resources:

- The DLC engaged Washington's tribal schools through focused support delivered in a culturally appropriate manner and aligned to culturally relevant resources. This outreach included hands-on work at seven tribal schools, as well as participation at the Washington State Indian Education Association's annual conference.
- A DLC staff member traveled twice to Kabul, Afghanistan, in cooperation with Washington State University's Center to Bridge the Digital Divide (CBDD). The CBDD is, in part, helping to build an educational infrastructure in Kabul. Since the DLC has been working to bridge the digital divide in Washington State and has a history of success with helping schools adopt online resources as part of their curriculum, the DLC was able to bring its expertise to this initiative to bring 21st century skills and e-learning to Afghanistan.

Finally, the DLC expanded criteria for membership during the year, bringing on private schools and creating a new membership package for homeschool families.

Moving forward

The DLC is building on the success of the 2005-06 school year as it moves into 2006-07. Thanks to continued support from the state of Washington, the DLC has been able to keep school membership fees stable while continuing to work to bring additional services to participants. Most of the participating schools from 2005-06 have returned, and many new schools have joined the DLC, bringing the total school count to over 125.

The DLC has been able to meet the needs of a variety of schools. Recognizing that many schools include groups that often have specialized resource needs, such as remediation programs, special program populations, and dropout prevention programs,, the DLC has designed a package of resources designed especially for these subpopulations. And since many schools don't need the DLC's complete package of resources, but do need to provide online course options to their students, the DLC has created a courses-only membership package. These members can take advantage of the DLC's discounted online course prices, and move up to a full membership package in the future.

Throughout the year, DLC staff will continue to work closely with schools to help improve student achievement. In addition to face-to-face meetings, the DLC is expanding online support options through web-based workshops and a train-the-trainer online course, ensuring that all participants have what they need to make the most of DLC resources.