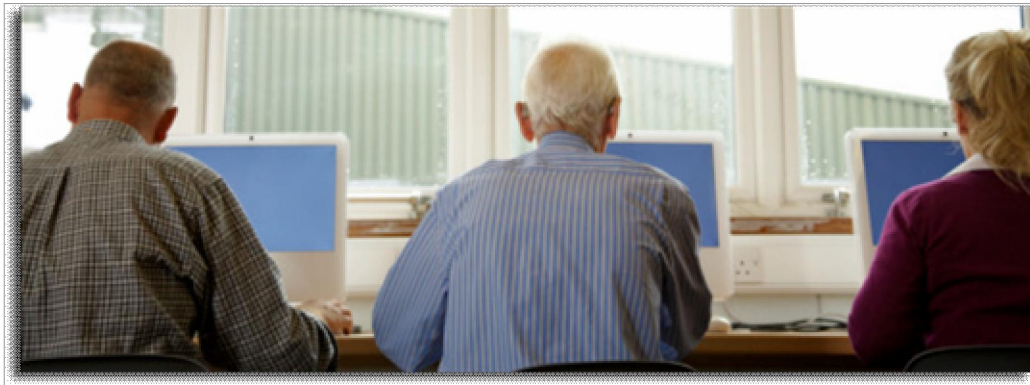


Distance Learning for Adults:

A Market Survey and Analysis of Delivery Systems and Content Providers



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Executive Summary

Market Survey Analysis

My survey was focused on distance learning for adult learners and attempted to survey different systems of delivery. Those sites could be best broken down three categories: online courses, information repositories, and basic tutorials. Each method aspires to deliver technology content, but the means and ends are much different. Many sites now require that users pay a fee, either a monthly subscription or per course taken. I surveyed everything from ElementK, a very large online repository of video-based tutorials on technology topics to the Penn Foster Career School, and online education and credentialing program that trains people in different technology certification fields.

Each website was evaluated using a [rubric](#) that used a 4pt scale on eight different dimensions: Interactivity, Features, Syllabus, Content, Communication, Graphics, Resources, and Color Scheme. Each category score was then averaged together to get an overall score on the 4pt scale. The websites were ranked by average score in the [data table](#). Each [sub-category was averaged](#) to examine differences in what websites emphasized more heavily. [Graphical charts](#) are also included at the end of the report.

Because of the qualitative differences in the type of content delivery, scores on different areas of the rubric were adversely affected. Many of the sites did not have a learning community setup that had forums, email communication with instructors, and such, since they were setup as static learning modules that were not a part of a course. Individual tutorials were not designed to be asynchronous learning, they're just content delivery with no feedback or assessments. Conversely, some providers were setup like a university—you and other students enroll in a scheduled course, complete assignments that are assessed by an instructor, and you receive feedback, grades, or other types of certification compensation. Information repositories fell

someplace in between, where Communication was limited, but some variety assessment or reflection was sometimes available at the end of the lesson.

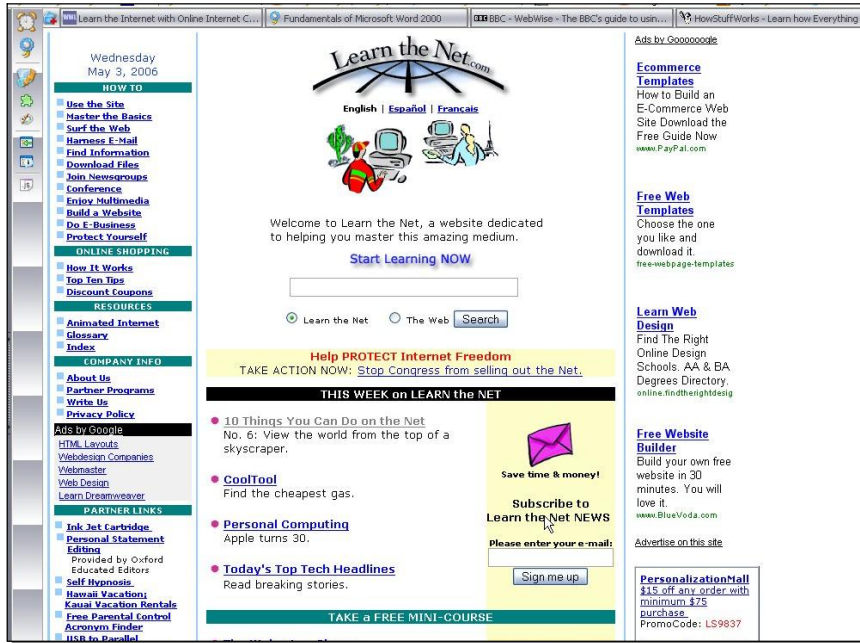
Another area with wide variance was the presence and or quality of a Syllabus. This is not surprising since a syllabus is a classroom based construct, and since many of these content providers did not use that model of teaching, they scored lower. However, most lessons did outline a course of action, what they hoped to cover and teach, if not in detail. Many of the fee-based sites deliberately omit this content to non-paying perusers for competitive reasons.

Other distinguishing characteristics for online courses was the use of online video ([Lynda.com](#) was a good example), using links to reference other materials (most did not) and the non-expressed goals of the website. Information repositories are modeled after a dictionary—you can search for a specific word or concept, and find lessons that relate to it. If you just do not recall how to add a drop shadow in Photoshop, you can easily find a quick lesson on how to do it. Or you can take an entire series of tutorials designed to teach you more thoroughly. These types of sites typically charge a monthly subscription that grants you access to all the content. I believe these sites will become the norm in coming years as many people don't have the time or energy to sit down for an entire course, or don't need to the education credits (or high cost that comes along with them). They simply want to learn in order to produce a product. Free tutorials lack the breadth of the repositories, but are free! Online courses lack the breadth and easy of using the course as a resource for brushing up later on.

Lastly, design quality and color schemes were also quite different. Lots of sites lack much interactivity, and had medium or poor graphic styles and colors. A few examples have been included in the report. Lastly, because of the video content on some sites, users must have a higher-speed connection or downloading the 2-3MB sections of video would become too tedious and time consuming.

Website Samples

Example 1: Interface Styles



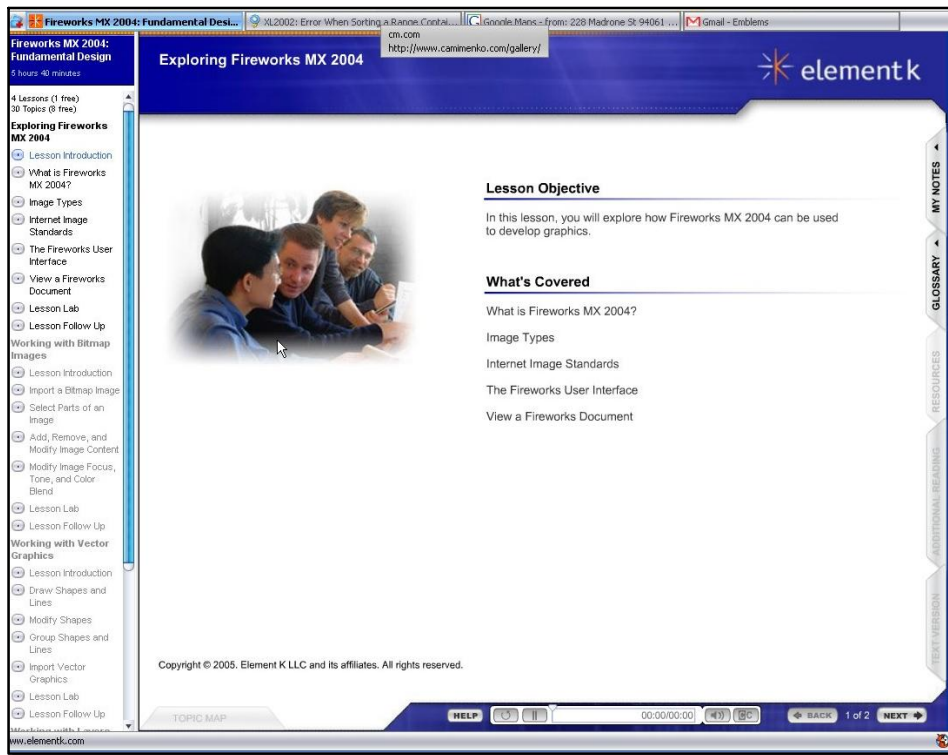
TOO BUSY

Above is an example of an overly busy interface. The sheer number of links and visual elements on the left and right side of the page make it difficult to navigate. Many free sites are forced to host ad-related links to help fund their websites. Conversely, the Atomic Learning site below has a very easy to navigate interface and you know exactly what you want to click on.



EASY TO NAVIGATE

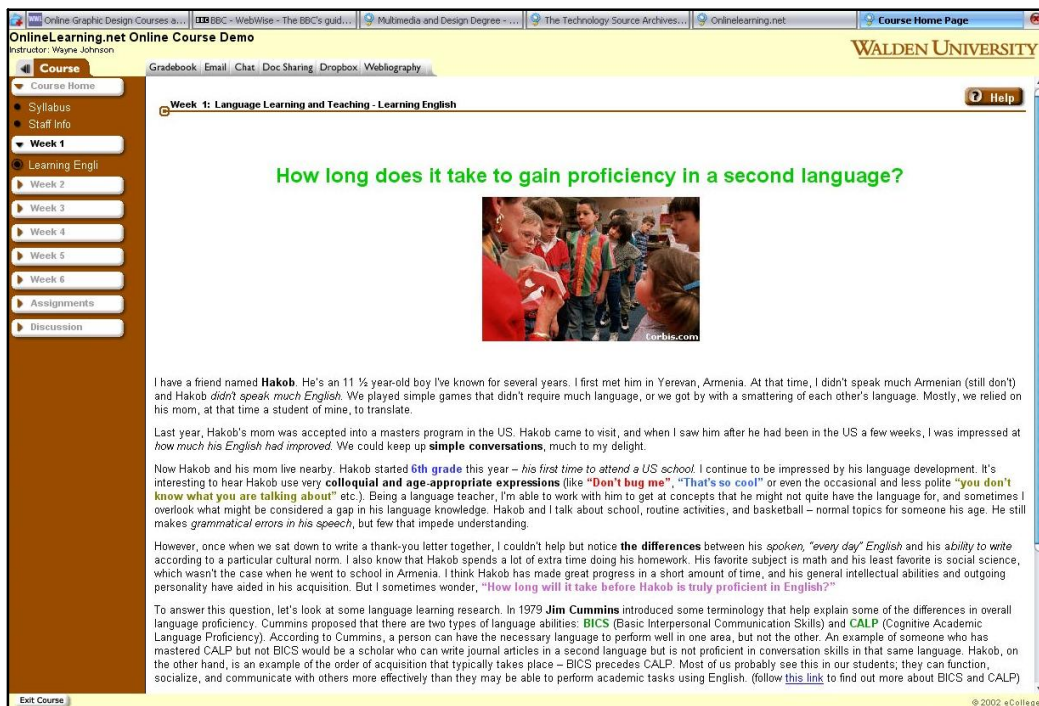
Example 2: Lesson Objectives and Layout



CLEAR
GOOD
COLORS

The top picture shows a well designed space that has objectives, information on what is covered, and step-wise chapters for progression. There is a navigation bar and video control at the bottom of the screen. The colors are pleasing, the graphics clear.

The bottom example has some of the same elements, but is burdened by too much text, poor color choices and unclear navigation



POOR COLOR
OVERCROWDED

Rubric

	4	3	2	1
Interactivity	Simulations, roll-overs, and user choices.	Text, images, links, roll-overs	Text and images.	Text only.
Features	Contains 3 or more of the following: -search -chat rooms - script - video - menus	Contains 2 of the following: -search -chat rooms - script - video - menus	Contains 1 of the following: -search -chat rooms - script - video - menus	Contains none of the following: -search -chat rooms - script - video - menus
Syllabus	Contains clear syllabus, complete with introduction, course objectives, goals, prerequisite skills, and a knowledge base. .	Syllabus is present but not entirely clear	Syllabus provides minimal information.	Syllabus is not present.
Content	The site has a well-stated clear purpose and theme that is carried out throughout the site. .	The site has a clearly stated purpose and theme, but may have one or two elements that do not seem to be related to it.	The purpose and theme of the site is somewhat muddy or vague.	The site lacks a purpose and theme
Communication	Instructor contact is easy to locate and use (email, voice mail, or fax). Provides methods for students to contact each other (discussion, chat, forum) or provide feedback about the course (survey).	Contact information, student to student contact, or feedback methods are present.	Contact information is present.	No contact information is present.
Graphics	Graphics are related to the theme/purpose of the site, are thoughtfully cropped, are of high quality and enhance reader interest or understanding.	Graphics are related to the theme/purpose of the site, are of good quality and enhance reader interest or understanding.	Graphics are related to the theme/purpose of the site, and are of good quality.	Graphics seem randomly chosen, are of low quality, OR distract the reader.
Resources	Site contains 3 or more of the following: -references -course outlines -glossary -screenshots -example files -student notes	Site contains 2 of the following: -references -course outlines -glossary -screenshots -example files -student notes	Site contains 1 of the following: -references -course outlines -glossary -screenshots -example files -student notes	Site contains none of the following: -references -course outlines -glossary -screenshots -example files -student notes
Color Scheme	Colors of background, fonts, unvisited and visited links form a pleasing palette, do not detract from the content, and are consistent across pages.	Colors of background, fonts, unvisited and visited links do not detract from the content, and are consistent across pages.	Colors of background, fonts, unvisited and visited links do not detract from the content	Colors of background, fonts, unvisited and visited links make the content hard to read or otherwise distract

Website Analysis

URL	Website	Interactivity	Features	Syllabus	Content	Communication	Graphics	Resources	Color	Average Score	Comments
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http://www.bbc.co.uk/webwise/course/	BBC Webwise	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	3.9	UK website that is designed to introduce people to the internet. Geared towards novice adults, with an outstanding interface and layout. Excellent graphics, simple roll-overs and effects. Big flash animations and orderly chunking. Each part has a stepwise progression and the user can choose where they want to start and end.
http://www.elementk.com/	Element K	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	3.9	Popular site used by Adobe and other corporate programs to access content. Layout includes a stepwise progression, goals and includes audio to accompany visual movies. Very high quality and easy to use. Lessons have follow-up and assessments built in as well. All it lacked was links to other sources, which would outsource their own learning.
http://www.learndirect.co.uk/	Learn Direct	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	3.8	Pay site had links to courses in many disciplines. Was very easy to navigate, and filled with outlines of their lessons, step-wise progression and more. Nice looking site, though I could not use an actual course. Color was a bit bright for my taste with the blue/orange combination.
http://learn.serebra.com/	Serebra Learning	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	3.8	Offers courses for individual and business. Certification, IT, Graphics and computer basics. Nice layout, java pull-down menus, and good content. Lessons, assessments and thumbnails clearly layout what you'll learn.
http://www.teachmeit.com/	TeachMeIt.com	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	3.8	Flash based tutorials and nice layout make the site easy to read. Flash elements and roll-overs make the site seem advanced. Colors are easy on the eyes and visually stimulating. Each course has an outline, objectives and estimated time to complete. Screen by screen of small text and screenshots to help you along.

URL	Website	Interactivity	Features	Syllabus	Content	Communication	Graphics	Resources	Color	Average Score	Comments
http://www.onlinelearning.net/	Online Learning.net	2	3	4	3	3	2	2	1	3.8	Geared towards educators and includes courses on blackboard.com use, instructional technology and educator focused topics. Looks like it redirects to a sub-site of sylvan. A basic text-based course study, with online syllabus details, but lacking in functionality. Hard to get color schemes, lacking hyperlinks, and interactivity
http://www.w3schools.com/	W3 Schools	4	3	4	3	3	4	4	3	3.5	Site dedicated solely to teaching web development. Nice interface and graphics but it is very densely packed with information. All free good quality tutorials, which included testing and assessment sections. I chose CSS and was pleased to see References, Quizzes and Diploma “certifications” that actually builds knowledge. http://www.w3schools.com/css/default.asp
http://training.worldwidelearn.com/	WorldWideLearn.com	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	3.4	Easy layout with some stock photos and good color scheme. Not very fancy, but gets the job done. Courses have general outline, but lack a detailed syllabus. Content delivery either online or printable, so that’s a nice option for different learning styles.
http://www.mindleaders.com/	Mind Leaders	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3.3	Very involved site design with free demos. Flash and Java content did not load in Firefox. Interactive book-style learning, but graphics were cheesy looking. Vast array of e-learning solutions for individuals and businesses, with so many topics it was staggering. I can imagine the content quality may suffer from the breadth.

URL	Website	Interactivity	Features	Syllabus	Content	Communication	Graphics	Resources	Color	Average Score	Comments
http://www.pennfoster.edu/category-technology.html	Penn Foster Career School	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	3	3.3	This was chosen to show what a more applied certificate oriented school looks like. All of the courses offered apply to certificated degrees and most of the technology is job-skill focused and certification based. Little content for teachers or individuals learning to “learn”. Nice interface and complex graphics are visually appealing. I was unable to gain much access to the actual courses but the outlines looked very solid.
http://www.lynda.com/	Lynda.com	3	4	3	4	2	4	2	4	3.3	Very nicely organized site that caters to individuals, businesses and 3 rd parties. Layout and color are easy to read, easy to navigate with large icons. Lessons are quicktime video based, which makes learning easier and visual. Lessons are broken into chunks which you can navigate to easily if you want to find a specific section. Designed as standalone, not an interactive course that has communication with other students. Video-based courses do require broadband to download the content.
http://www.howstuffworks.com/	How Stuff Works	4	3	2	4	2	4	3	3	3.1	This site is not technically an e-learning course site, but more of a collection of knowledge. It is well laid out and has excellent graphics. The tabbed selections make navigation easy. Pages can be too busy with flash-animated ads, making it more difficult to navigate when you’re inside.
http://www.discoveryvip.com/index.html	Discovery VIP	3	3	3	3	2	4	3	3	3.0	Clearing house of community training articles. Tutorials are submitted by the public on a huge array of technology topics. The free previews of Dreamweaver 8 were actually pretty good. Included course overviews and direct progression of steps. Quicktime based video using screen capture. I did not like that I couldn’t just skip to the next video within the screen

URL	Website	Interactivity	Features	Syllabus	Content	Communication	Graphics	Resources	Color	Average Score	Comments
http://www.internet4classrooms.com/on-line2.htm	Internet For Classrooms	2	3	3	4	2	3	3	3	2.9	Basic tutorials designed for educators to use technology in their classrooms. Teaches technology skills and gives a few lesson ideas. Graphics are more amateurish and remind you of the typical "educator" site with low-quality gifs and poor color scheme choices. Very helpful for teachers however, since it caters to their needs and has tutorials on software like Inspiration, which is usually lacking at more generalized tutorial and learning websites
http://www.uopxonline.com/	University of Phoenix	3	2	3	4	3	3	2	3	2.9	Longtime online university provider. Layout looked fine, but I wasn't able to gain access to anything other than course outlines for each degree program
http://www.atomiclearning.com/	Atomic Learning	3	3	1	3	2	4	2	4	2.8	Similar to Lynda.com this site uses quicktime videos tutorials. It also allows searching for a specific topic when you pay for the monthly service. Layout is flash based and very simple to navigate. The color and design are cartoon-based, but comes off looking good. The video quality and audio is not quite as nice as other similar sites, but its still effective. No syllabus or overview on the lessons I previewed.
http://www.vtc.com/	VTC.com	2	3	1	4	2	3	2	3	2.5	Quicktime based video training. Resolution was very low quality on the Adobe Premiere 6 I previewed. Lack of syllabus, simple course outline. Cost is low per-course, but I think the return is as well. Also allows a monthly subscription for all-access to every title.

URL	Website	Interactivity	Features	Syllabus	Content	Communication	Graphics	Resources	Color	Average Score	Comments
http://www.staffkit.com/	StaffKit.com	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2.4	Offers low-cost courses that are self-paced and open for a period of 1 year from payment. University credits through Ohio University, and basic computer certification. The interface had bad rollover effects and was a bit hard to choose from the courses listed.
http://www.learnthenet.com/english/index.html	Learn the Net	2	3	1	3	2	2	2	2	2.1	Site is difficult to navigate with too many links on the side bars. Basic text and non-interesting graphics. Content is rich as well as off-site links.
http://coursecatalog.com/	JER Group	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	2	2.0	Vast array of courses, but navigation is difficult. Graphically amateur, no breadcrumbs, difficult to move around. Back button is disabled when you choose a course. Syllabus and course outlines. Very rudimentary, and would have trouble paying for this out-of-date looking interface. Supposedly allied with accredited universities, but I could not find links to them.
	CATEGORY AVERAGE	3.1	3.3	3.0	3.5	2.7	3.4	2.8	3.2	3.2	

Chart 1: Websites By Average Score

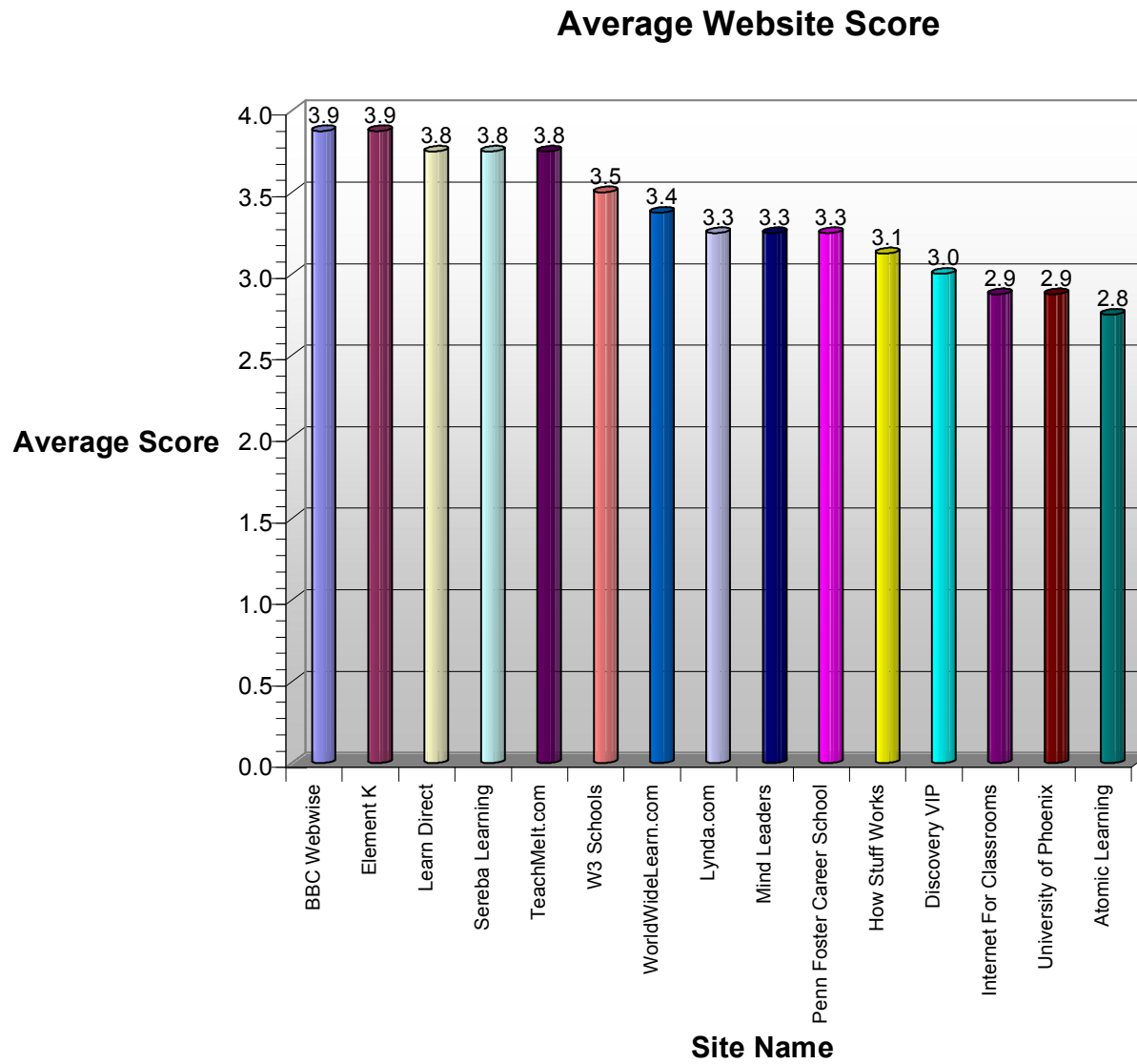


Chart 2: Sub-category analysis

