Chapter 79

The Ever-Evolving Educator:
Examining K-12 Online Teachers in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the current research on the educational, training, and demographic characteristics of those involved in teaching K-12 online. Although very few colleges of education incorporate any aspect of teaching online into their curricula, the existing online teacher preparation programs are discussed. Past and ongoing research reveals a dramatic disconnect between: (a) the rapidly expanding expectations for and implementation of online education at the K-12 levels and (b) the surprisingly limited extent to which teachers are actually being educated, trained, and otherwise prepared to function in this challenging new educational environment. The implications for teacher education programs and current K-12 virtual schools are clear. Effective online teaching techniques must be defined, empirically proven, and efficiently implemented by both future and current K-12 online teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Online education at the K-12 level is in the early stage of an exponential growth pattern that will ultimately result in an entirely new educational paradigm (Miller & Ribble, 2010). The need for highly-qualified, classroom teachers has always been critical, but now such teachers must also be trained to meet the challenges of conveying knowledge to students that are separated from the teacher in space and time (Charania, 2010). This new category of teachers must be capable of (a) transferring knowledge without face-to-face contact, (b) designing and developing course content in a technology-based environment and (c) delivering content in a way that will both engage the remote student and assure that the content is actually learned. Unfortunately, there is a significant disconnect between the growing expectations for online education and the training

of teachers expected to teach in this uniquely different environment. While some form of online learning is now available in every state (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011), only a small minority of current K-12 online teachers have actually received formal training on how to teach online during the course of their teacher education program (Archambault, 2011; Dawley, Rice, & Hinks, 2010). The current status of online K-12 education must be viewed against a background of teacher training that includes very little, if any, relevant instruction pertaining to teaching in an online environment.

This chapter will present and discuss the following topics:

1. An introduction to online teacher quality and preparation;
2. The characteristics of K-12 online teachers based on current research;
3. Programmatic online teacher preparation efforts, both at the pre-service and in-service levels; and,
4. Implications and recommendations for teacher education programs.

BACKGROUND

Current Status of K-12 Online and Blended Learning

During the 2012-2013 school year, 31 states had at least one fully-online, statewide school (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2012). Enrollment in K-12 courses offered by online schools has increased from 50,000 course enrollments in 2000 (Clark, 2001) to over 2 million course enrollments in 2009 (Patrick & Dawley, 2009). Watson et al. (2012) report that about 5% of all K-12 students in the United States are enrolled in at least one online class. Queen, Lewis and Coopersmith (2011) found that 55% of public school districts were offering some form of online experience for their students during the 2009-2010 school year. Among these schools, 74% reported an interest in expanding the online opportunities being offered in the following years (Queen, Lewis, & Coopersmith, 2011).

There are many reasons for the increasing number of K-12 students who attend school online, including, for example, the ability to work at one's own pace and to take courses that are otherwise unavailable. As of 2010, Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses in common subjects were offered in fewer than 34% of public school districts (Lee, Edwards, Menson, & Rawls, 2011). Advanced courses as well as credit recovery are two of the most common reasons that school districts have made online offerings available to students (Lee et al., 2011).

Online programs have evolved over the past two decades through the independent efforts of geographically and politically separated administrative entities. Different formats have been experimentally implemented in the presentation of different subjects, using different technologies at different grade levels. This lack of any common or centralized development has lead to the adoption and use of different terms for the same or closely similar concepts in online learning. Only recently has there been a trend toward more unified and shared terminology and identification of the basic formats by which K-12 content is delivered, in whole or part, through the Internet.

As defined by Clark (2001), a "virtual school" is "an educational organization that offers K-12 courses through Internet or Web-based methods" (p. 1). According to Watson et al. (2012), one of the fastest growing educational formats is "blended learning," a combination of face-to-face learning with online learning. The structures of blended learning models are themselves evolving to include different elements of communication and different proportions of face-to-face and digital delivery.

Online programs are also being categorized on the basis of the administrative structure by which

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