Chapter 5

Developing Educational Leadership in Graduate Students through Cross-Program Collaboration in a 3D Immersive Environment

Barbara B. Howard
Appalachian State University, USA

Nita J. Matzen
Appalachian State University, USA

John H. Tashner
Appalachian State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Educational leadership is no longer considered the exclusive realm of the principal but extends to all educators within the school. Shared leadership encompasses collaboration among many educational roles to define the effective schools of the 21st century. New job demands for a diverse population of leaders and growing accountability at all levels for preparing such effective leaders provides the impetus for faculty in the department of Leadership and Educational Studies at Appalachian State University to explore new ways to prepare our students for these realities. The resulting project represents a shift from discreet courses that trapped programs in self-sustained silos of learning to expand both learning and teaching along with that of students into a more global perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present an example of engaging graduate students in a collaborative effort to address a specific issue relevant to educational leadership with the intent of promoting communities of practice. The graduate students represented up to four programs within a department of leadership and educational studies at a

mid-sized university in the Southeast. They are at various stages of preparation for one of the following complex roles of leadership: school administration, library science or instructional technology. The faculty within the program areas utilized 3-D virtual world platforms in an effort to the promote communities of practice that would transfer to the schools served by these future leaders.

A discussion of the context of the project is addressed first and includes a description of the delivery system of the programs involved as well as the issues of evolving leadership challenges that spurred its development. Next, the theoretical base for the project defines the rationale for the structure of the project. A description of the project itself outlines the parameters as well as specific goals and expected outcomes. This description of the project also includes a rationale for selecting the 3-D virtual worlds in terms of student engagement and support of these goals and outcomes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the impact on students and implications for the structure of similar preparation programs in higher education.

Context of the Project

The context for the project greatly influenced its design given that our students are not physically on the same campus on any given day. Most are scattered across a hundred or so mile range of the main campus. This significantly hampered the use of face-to-face meetings among students of our various programs thus necessitating the need for a virtual world environment that would allow students from wide geographical areas to work together collaboratively.

The Department of Leadership and Educational Studies (LES) at Appalachian State University prepares students to assume leadership roles in pre-K-12 settings or higher education by offering three levels of degree programs - Masters, Specialist, and Doctorate in Educational Leadership. These degrees are housed in the following programs

within the department: School Administration, Higher Education, Library Science, and Instructional Technology. Most of our students attend classes on satellite campuses scattered across central and western North Carolina or online through our Extension and Distance Learning Program. This offers a convenient and affordable avenue to our students who often maintain full-time jobs in community colleges or public schools. We design these programs to be delivered using a cohort model, which tends to create comfortably familiar social settings among classmates over the course of the six or so semesters of their program.

Although the advantages of such a convenient delivery system are obvious, the major drawback of students becoming isolated from the larger academic community of a university has not been lost on the faculty. Faculty who travel up to two hours one way to these satellite campuses often become isolated themselves – another unintended consequence that seemed to discourage communication as well as collaboration among the various program areas. While we recognized our need to develop collaborative skills among our students, our delivery system seemed to discourage it. This lack of communication, a barrier to collaboration itself, became a concern to faculty and the impetus for exploring new ways to engage our students and faculty across program areas. We recognized that new demands on our students would require new skills and knowledge on a scale that stretched the confines of our individual programs. It became obvious that we as a faculty would have to collaborate in the development of opportunities for our students to engage in collaboration for their own learning.

We began this project with the recognition that our graduate students face challenges undreamed of just a generation ago as they prepare to lead schools. Schools have become complex learning organizations struggling to meet the demands of a rapidly altering global society (Box, 2009; Chalker, 1992; McLeod, 2007). Society through its political systems of accountability demands even

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