

Chapter 24

Windows into Teaching and Learning: Uncovering the Potential for Meaningful Remote Field Experiences in Distance Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Windows into Teaching and Learning (WiTL), a project conceived and actualized by authors situated in a large urban university in the southeastern region of the United States, captures the nuisance of online learning as a method for transforming school-based clinical experiences in teacher preparation programs. This chapter introduces and describes the theoretical context in which the project was developed in hopes to convey the potential for uncomplicated and intuitive innovations in teacher education to recalibrate current practices to the demands of the 21st Century classroom. An overview of the challenges facing colleges of education in providing meaningful and relevant clinical experiences to pre-service teachers enrolled in online distance education courses is discussed and serves as the impetus of WiTL. In the chapter, the authors explain the methods and technology used by the researchers to demonstrate the project's practical duplicability in almost any course with clinical requirements. Furthermore, the authors provide a glimpse into the potential impact of WiTL as a means of facilitating meaningful field experiences in distance education and traditional coursework, as well as corollary benefits realized for student participants and mentor teachers.

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INTRODUCTION

Technology has changed the nature of teaching and learning in the 21st Century. This is especially prevalent in higher education. With the advent of online learning and Web 2.0 tools, how institutions of higher education serve their student populations is evolving. The possibilities of technology-mediated learning along with economic contractions have led to administrative decisions that have shifted investments in infrastructure renovations and new construction to low overhead options, specifically online learning. As a result, universities and colleges have experienced significant fiscal expenditures on information technologies and a philosophical transition from the “brick and mortar era” of schooling to virtual learning environments (Schulken, 2008, p. 1). As expansion in online education continues in higher education, innovative strategies for addressing traditional requirements of classroom-based teaching and learning have been sought.

This chapter introduces and describes the theoretical context in which *Windows into Teaching and Learning (WiTL)*, designed to capture the nuances of online learning as a method for transforming school-based clinical experiences in teacher preparation programs, was conceptualized and developed. An overview of the challenges facing colleges of education in providing meaningful and relevant clinical experiences to pre-service teachers enrolled in online distance education courses is discussed and serves as the impetus of *WiTL*. In the chapter, the authors explain the methods and technology used by the researchers. Furthermore, they provide a glimpse into the potential impact of *WiTL* as a means of facilitating meaningful field experiences in distance education and traditional coursework, as well as corollary benefits realized for student participants and mentor teachers.

BACKGROUND

In teacher education, field experiences in clinical settings (e.g. observations in PK-12 schools) are considered essential licensure requirements for preparing preservice and lateral entry teachers. These classroom experiences bridge theoretically-based university coursework in content and pedagogy with practical applications of teaching and learning with PK-12 learners. The importance of these authentic experiences is affirmed by the national accrediting body, NCATE (National Council for Accreditation in Teacher Education), who identifies field experiences and clinical practices as one of six *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation Institutions*. In the words of NCATE (2007), field experiences allow teacher candidates to observe and reflect on content, professional, and pedagogical knowledge, skills, and dispositions in a variety of settings with diverse students and teachers. Both field experiences and clinical practice extend the institutional goals into PK-12 setting through modeling by practicing teachers, systematic reflective analysis, and well-designed opportunities to learn about methods and content applications (p. 29-30). Thus, the need for university managed clinical experiences poses a unique opportunity for remote distance education teacher licensure programs.

Field Experiences in Distance Education-Defining Challenges

Traditionally, in most colleges of education, all clinical experiences are completed onsite in PK-12 schools. In the case of the University of North Carolina in Charlotte (UNC Charlotte), clinical experiences are required in most, if not all, teacher education classes leading to initial licensure, whether the candidate seeks a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) or a Graduate Certificate in Teaching (GCT). Clinical experiences range from 10 to 30 hours per education course. These hours are intended to be an extension of

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