

Chapter 18

Using the How People Learn Framework for Online Course Design in Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

The demand for online teacher education programs continues to grow in the United States. Two trends have fueled this dramatic growth for such programs: (1) The shortage of teachers in certain areas has prompted the spread of alternative routes to teacher preparation; (2) The nature of the higher education student in alternative programs has transformed from a traditional to a non-traditional profile. With the growth of online programs comes the need for effective courses. This case study uses the How People Learn (HPL) framework as the conceptual model to examine online courses in a teacher education program for evidence of high level learning outcomes. The case study involved data collection in the form of surveys, interviews and artifacts from four online classes using the HPL framework. Results of the study demonstrate that the HPL framework provides a powerful structure for creating and assessing environments conducive to the work of prospective professionals.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The organization is a mid-sized state university in the southeastern section of the United States with a strong tradition in teacher education. Founded in 1889 as a semi-private secondary school, it became a four-year teachers college in 1929. The teachers college served as a model for other regional colleges in the state. The college was designated a regional

university in 1967 and in 1972 became a member of the state university system. In fall 2008 total enrollment at the university was 9,050 students.

SETTING THE STAGE

In order to meet the critical shortage of special education teachers in the state, the special education program became an early adaptor of online teaching. The program received a small grant in 2002 to pay

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-779-4.ch018

faculty to develop online courses. Currently three programs in special education are totally online: the Master of Teaching (MAT) program, an alternative teacher education program; the Master of Education (MAED) program for those who already have a teaching license; and the Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) licensure program, an add-on license for teaching students in gifted programs. Enrollment in these three programs has grown substantially over the years and now stands at approximately 170 students.

Online technology methodologies are transforming the nature of both teaching and learning. Instructors are moving from deliverers of information to facilitators; likewise, students are becoming participants in a learning environment where the focus is on knowledge construction rather than knowledge reproduction. In addition, standards for learning are higher than they have ever been in the past for teachers. Many educational reformers advise putting teachers in a professional role as problems solvers and collaborators as well as both producers and consumers of research (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007). Not only do teachers need the knowledge and skills of their craft, they need to be able to improve their teaching through reflection and evaluation (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

CASE DESCRIPTION

Introduction

Collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving are critical skills for teachers in the 21st century. While teaching in the past century tended to be more of an isolated activity, teachers today are expected to be active participants in decisions that affect the entire school and to work collaboratively in teams to address school and student issues. In addition to that of a collaborator, the role of the teacher has been described as one of an adaptive expert (Darling-Hammond, 2007;

Darling Hammond & Bransford, 2005) who is able to solve problems, construct new knowledge and in turn, solve new problems as opposed to a worker who engages in routine tasks. Filling the role of an adaptive expert requires considerable reflection, critical thinking and evaluation. As an adaptive expert, teaching is viewed as the work of a professional as opposed to that of a technician. While technicians practice a set of known solutions to known problems, the work of professionals involves crafting new solutions to problems and predicaments that change on a daily basis.

Preparing teachers for their work as collaborators and problems solvers is a challenge facing teacher educators. Online courses are often criticized for focusing on the knowledge acquisition level rather than engaging students in complex problem-solving activities. Additionally, collaboration in online courses is often limited to superficial discussions on discussion boards. In this case, faculty used available technology and the How People Learn (HPL) framework as a conceptual model to design courses to maximize collaboration, reflection, and problem solving. The distance teacher preparation program provides evidence of high level learning outcomes that involve collaboration, reflection, mentoring, and problem solving

The Learners

This case study involved the examination of four online courses held over two years. The first year, one course was studied in depth. The following year, three additional online courses were included in the case study to follow up on themes and issues identified the first year. There were twenty-four students enrolled in the first online course in which the case study was conducted. The following year fifty additional students participated. The students taking the courses were non-traditional, with a wide range of experience and backgrounds. They were either lateral entry teachers seeking licensure in special education, teachers seeking

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