Chapter 8
Promoting Collaborative Learning in Online Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Online learning continues to grow as a learning option for millions of students in US colleges and universities. Collaboration plays an important role in student learning. This chapter presents information on how collaborative learning was designed and implemented in a comprehensive online course in reading for pre-service and in-service educators in grades P-12. The author presents details on course design issues, instructional practices, benefits, and challenges associated with collaborative learning in this online course, and implications for further development and evaluation of collaborative learning in teacher preparation programs. The author also provides recommendations for promoting collaboration in online teacher education courses.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the author describes how collaborative learning was designed and incorporated in a graduate level online course in reading for preservice and inservice educators. The purpose of this chapter is not to formally assess or evaluate collaborative learning; instead, the author will present her rationale for incorporating collaborative learning experiences in an online education course, the ways in which collaborative learning was incorporated, assessed, and monitored, and she will also share overall observations about benefits and challenges associated with collaborative

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learning in this situated context. The author will also reflect on the role of collaborative learning in teacher preparation courses. Collaborative learning can support online and teacher preparation learning goals and objectives by promoting critical thinking skills, perspective taking, shared knowledge and decision-making, content knowledge, and reflection.

BACKGROUND

Online Learning and Teacher Education

The 2010 *Class Differences: Online Education in the US* report by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (Allen & Seaman, 2010) revealed that US student enrollment rose by almost one million students from a year earlier. According to the survey results from over 2,500 colleges and universities nationwide, approximately 5.6 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in fall 2009. Online learning is a significant choice of learning in US higher education institutions. According to this report, there has been a12-14% annual increase, on average, in enrolment for fully online learning over the five years 2004-2009 in the post-secondary system, compared with an average of approximately two percent per year in enrolments overall.

The convenient accessibility of knowledge, ongoing participation, dialogue, feedback from peers and instructor, availability of formats for presenting materials (Li & Irby, 2008), plethora of readily available tools and resources, learner self-regulation (Li & Irby, 2008; Thomson, 2010), and opportunities for differentiated online instruction (Thomson, 2010), have made online learning a very attractive and relevant learning choice for postsecondary students (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009; Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). Almost 30% of all college and university students now take at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). As adoption of online learning continues to increase, issues related to quality of online learning become vital. John Sener (2010) proposes that soon online education will become an integral part of the educational experience.

Although many obstacles still remain to full-scale adoption of online higher education, all higher education students will experience online education at some point of their academic career. It is predicted that college students will be able to take online or blended programs in almost any discipline (Sener, 2010). The goal of online learning is to improve the quality of the learning experience for students, offer alternative means of learning, and allow them to experiment, become independent learners, and drivers of change. In spite of its rapid growth and availability, much online learning is still designed using standard educational practices (e.g., lectures, discussions, quizzes, etc.) (Norton & Hathaway, 2008).

Concerns with traditional pedagogy facilitated by course management systems raise questions about the quality of the learner's experiences. Factors such as learner self-monitoring, the social, teaching, and cognitive presence of the online instructor or facilitator, instructional design factors, relevancy and quality of content, collaborative learning opportunities, participants' perceptions of the instruction, collaboration, and online learning, all influence the online learning experience. In the context of steady increase in online courses by US postsecondary students, the types of learning students experience as part of their online learning experiences become critical to program development, delivery, instruction, student satisfaction, and quality assurance.

Preparing teachers who can effectively meet the needs of all students is a major concern of policy-makers, teacher educators, and the public. In recent years, teacher education has been under the political spotlight due to the lack of performance of students in P-12 grades in national and international assessments, the need for tech-

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