

Chapter 10

Cyber–Place Learning in an Online Teacher Preparation Program: Engaging Learning Opportunities through Collaborations and Facilitation of Learning

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ABSTRACT

Learning and technology skills required for the 21st century can be developed through online pre-service teaching preparation programs. This chapter is an exploratory look at the implications of learner-centered and place-based approaches. These approaches to teaching and learning are collaborative and distributed through online learning. In this chapter, it is the author's intent to offer guidelines for transference of classroom best practices to a cyber-place learning environment that will align with teacher preparation programs. The main objective is to improve access to advanced educational experiences by allowing students and instructors to participate in remote learning communities that foster skills needed for the 21st century. Online learning communities provide collaboration that is flexible and convenient and opportunities for individuals who may not otherwise have their voices heard.

INTRODUCTION

Over 5.5 million students, or nearly 1 in 4 students, took at least one online course during the fall of 2009, and approximately 84 percent were undergraduates (Allen & Seaman, 2010). As universities prepare undergraduates, are instructors

of education programs producing quality online instruction? What role will education programs have in developing and training educators in the technological future of education? In Florida there are currently 63,675 students attending Florida Virtual Schools. Are educators ready to educate these tech-savvy students? “The Department of

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Education views virtual schools as a powerful technology innovation expanding opportunities for learning anytime, anyplace in support of the No Child Left Behind Act” (Hassel, 2004, p. 4). Learning is a social activity as well as an individual one. Online learning offers multiple opportunities for a high social learning environment (Kearsley, 2000). Interactivity can vary drastically from course to course. Swan (2001) states course design is critical when determining the amount of interaction and the depth of discussion. Shaw (2006) states that skills gained through collaborative experiences are highly transferable to team-based work environments, which are elements of preparation for the 21st century. Educator preparation programs need to prepare pre-service teachers for the preparation of the students entering the work force. Chapman, Ramondt, and Smiley (2005) confirm that the workplace environment requires the learner to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information bringing the learner into the higher order thinking skills needed in the 21st century.

The driving force of this chapter is to explore the primary role of the learner in a teacher preparation program. Teacher preparation programs must mirror or align with goals and objectives that will not only propel pre-service teachers but also potential students they may influence. This chapter explores online learning and technology skills that are required for the 21st century as well as the need for collaboration and critical thinking skills. Problem solving and communication skills that are necessary for further development of learners are also discussed. Implications of learner-centered and place-based approaches that are collaborative and distributed through some form of online learning program are investigated. It is the intent of this chapter to offer guidelines for transference of classroom best practices to a cyber-place learning environment that will align with teacher preparation programs.

BACKGROUND

Distance learning environments or virtual classrooms are defined as modes of instructional delivery in which either place or time separates the instructor and the student. The virtual classroom is a teaching and learning environment located within a computer-mediated communication system. The full objective is to improve access to advanced educational experiences by allowing students to participate in remote learning environments, promoting learning that is time and place independent (Deal, 2002).

Distance learning provides opportunities for individuals who may not otherwise be able to participate due to time or place constraints. It offers flexibility and convenience at any time. According to Dillenbourg and Schneider (1995), the distinction between cooperative and collaborative learning is imperious. In a distance learning environment, collaboration becomes imperative for learning. The protocols for cooperative learning (classroom based) are as follows: dissemination takes place prior to the project, the subtask separated amongst group members, and finally the partners solve their portions independently. Collaborative learning is the opportunity to build synchronously two or more subjects and design a solution to the problem jointly. In a collaborative environment, the teacher becomes a facilitator in a learning-centered environment. According to Schiro, (2008) learning-centered ideology takes place when the teacher becomes the facilitator and observer. Teachers and students develop intellectually, socially and emotionally in accordance with their own innate nature and that of their culture. Their development of knowledge intensifies as the curriculum enhances the ability to make real world connections.

Virtual schools have the ability to extend equitable access to high quality education to urban and rural areas, low-income students, and

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