Chapter 12
Teacher Education in Online Contexts:
Course Design and Learning Experiences to Facilitate Literacy Instruction for Teacher Candidates

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ABSTRACT

Teacher candidates in online courses engage in authentic learning to foster 21st-century practices similar to those of their K–12 students, namely information and technology literacy and media production. This chapter describes instructional practices used in six online literacy courses for pre-service and in-service teacher candidates. The instructor assumed multiple roles during online instruction, including pedagogue, technologist, and evaluator. Although the course designs were highly structured, the instructor incorporated multiple resources to support diverse learners, to foster independent learning, to promote critical thinking and reflection on how instructional strategies can be used in K–12 classrooms, and to facilitate small group collaboration through authentic problem-solving tasks. Online courses for teacher education programs can serve as a vehicle for supporting candidates' information and technology skills. Online instructors can assume the primary role of pedagogue to help candidates connect their content area with best practices in literacy and technology.

INTRODUCTION

Today's learners "are increasingly exposed to an array of sophisticated learning resources and technology tools such as hypertexts, streaming video, and visualization tools" (Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2010, p. 84). Consequently college students today are more technologically savvy than their predecessors (Fisher & Wright, 2010; Prensky, 2001). Despite these capabilities, some online learners in teacher education programs are not able to draw upon their out-of-school practices

with technology to complete some academic tasks, such as conducting online research and evaluating information (O'Hanlon & Diaz, 2010). This limitation is problematic because in order to support K–12 students, contemporary teachers are expected to use technology to support learning (International Society for Technology in Education, 2008; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004).

Another literacy challenge we face as educators is the inundation of information and the abundance of media; educators need guidance on how to prepare students to critically evaluate information retrieved from media sources. Research shows that some people tend to make "snap judgments about relevance of information content based on surface observations of [media and technology] sources" (O'Hanlon & Diaz, 2010, p. 43), rather than evaluating information and its source for credibility, reliability, authenticity, purpose, and validity. Online teaching and learning are particularly important areas in a globalized, information-rich society where people are bombarded with information from multiple sources, and where many people use technology and media as a vehicle for reading, for access to information, and for communication.

Allen and Seaman (2010) reported that enrollment in online courses has increased annually by 11.4% since 2006. In fall 2009, 29.3% of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions were taking online courses; an average annual increase of 2.8% since 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The trend of higher education institutions offering more online courses indicates the need for more research on how online instructors facilitate and design courses. In addition to understanding the pedagogy of online instruction, research in online teacher education courses is important because what teacher candidates experience in these courses may have implications for K–12 instruction. There is also a need to "pay more attention to the role of resources in learning" (Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2010, p. 84) and to the types of strategies online instructors use to facilitate learn-

ing. Most educators will agree that the research reports in this area need more rich descriptions of pedagogical methods, assignments, and assessments (Dell, Low, & Wilker, 2010).

With a focus on pedagogy, this chapter explores the effectiveness of online teacher education and how educators can use technology to prepare teacher candidates, particularly in online literacy courses offered to pre-service and in-service teachers. Although the chapter will focus on fully online literacy courses, a replicable model for structuring hybrid (blended) or fully online teacher education courses is offered. The instructional model presented here fostered opportunities for teacher candidates to practice using technology, to explore ways to incorporate it into K–12 practice, and to use online resources to develop a better understanding of effective literacy instruction. Novice online instructors and others seeking to develop a more structured course format might benefit from this type of course design model.

The chapter will (a) provide a brief overview of teaching and learning trends in online courses; (b) describe course experiences and instructional strategies used in six online literacy courses; (c) describe how course content and design can foster critical thinking, technology, and information literacy skills of teacher candidates; (d) identify the roles online teacher educators assume to promote learning in online contexts; (e) explain how highly structured course designs support different learning styles and provide access to varied resources; and (f) highlight implications for teachers' use of technology-based learning in K–12 contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational Structure of Online Courses

The literature on online instruction shows that effective courses use various assignments and assessments, multimedia and video, peer-to-peer

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