Chapter 6

Using Second Life to Support Student Teachers' Socio-Reflective Practice:
A Mixed-Method Analysis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two congruent, yet converging phenomena are taking place in teacher preparation programs. The first centers on the integration and use of social technologies in collaborative learning, and the second focuses on the shifting of student-teacher reflective practices from private activities to interactive and social practices. The catalytic nature of social technologies provides opportunities to explore relationships between discourse and interactivity. Our global society pleads for educational institutions to prepare teachers who can navigate between cultures, deal with uncertainty, and share and question real-life issues toward structured dialogues, which, in turn, will elicit critical reflection. This mixed-methods analysis fuses social technology use with the Multi User Virtual Environment (MUVE), Second Life, with the social practice of reflection among student teachers during their field experience placements.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

In many teacher preparation programs in the U.S. and abroad, the concept of reflection is typically introduced and applied throughout the program. Reflection is used toward examining, adjusting, and further developing personal theories on teaching and learning. Applicable knowledge gleaned from student teaching field experiences resulting in critical reflection takes time, support, and several varied experiences (Hiebert & Stigler, 2000). In past years, reflection has typically been carried out through individually-constructed, personal narratives (written or oral), however 21st century teaching and learning is rapidly morphing this historically individualistic activity toward reflections that stretch far and beyond classroom walls. The notion of social learning is altering the way future and current teachers approach their own teaching and learning, and should serve as a model for today's student teachers. Current societal expectations encourage teachers to continually gain knowledge—from pre-service education up until retirement from the profession (Guskey, 2000; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Portfolios, professional learning communities, reflective models, and action research have served as products of teacher learning that further and support the quest for lifelong learning (Day & Sachs, 2004; Guskey, 2000; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Moreover, these forms of learning also promote more collaborative, and socially-constructed learning opportunities which are also aligned to 21st century learning.

Thus, building from these social platforms, the social, reflective, and affective aspects of teacher preparation programs support collectivity, collaboration, and community (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Kwang, 2001; Hoban, 2002; Huberman, 2001; Lester, 2003; Lieberman, 1994; Peery, 2004; Rogers & Babinski, 2002). Researchers posit that student teachers learn successful pedagogy through: observations, analysis, active participation, and reflection; through mentor and peer conversations and collaborations; and through the sharing of classroom experiences (Becker & Reil, 1999; Commeyras & DeGroff, 1998; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner, Cochran-Smith, McDonald, & Zeichner, 2005; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) further asserts the importance of collaborative reflection, stipulating that student teacher candidates should "reflect on their practice and make necessary adjustments to enhance student learning" and to further "collaborate with colleagues to contribute to school improvement and renewal" (Standard I.C.2) (NCATE, 2008, p. 18). Conversations and collaborations allow for knowledge-negotiating and building based on multiple, rather than individual, perspectives (Cunningham, Duffy, & Knuth, 1993). Empirical research has linked, and positively evidenced the coupling of teachers and reflective collaboration with significant improvement in teaching (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Wilson & Berne, 1999; Winter, 2003).

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