

ELECTRONICALLY ENHANCING DISCOURSE

USING ELECTRONIC MEANS TO ENHANCE DISCOURSE, TO ENGAGE LEARNERS, AND TO BUILD COMMUNITY IN AN INTEGRATED METHODS COURSE FOR ELEMENTARY PRESERVICE TEACHERS

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INTRODUCTION

Rogers and Dunn (2000) studied how preservice teachers (PSTs) constructed their own personal practice theories for teaching and learning based on a range of contexts that they were involved in. PSTs drew much more heavily on prior experience than on what they learned in methods courses in order to create their theories. Open communication increased the use of methods content in forming personal practice theories. Benson & Meyer (2000) described how the use of technology enhanced collaboration between PSTs and their professors. They concluded that discussions provided PSTs with a supportive environment to air thoughts about teaching; discussions helped develop community; focus questions coincided with concerns and issues; and discussions fostered evaluation.

Using technology can create new learning environments that allow for construction of understanding. (Salomon, 1998; Connell, 1998). Baker (1994) found that there were behaviors that professors used which increased interaction via technology. Carlson (2000) described a model that infused technology, that minimized impositions and that allowed for maximum student construction.

METHODOLOGY

During the spring semester of 2000, a study began in which two professors team-teaching a block methods course began to explore how using electronic media would enhance discourse and engage students in further construction of understanding related to pedagogy in the 6-credit-hour course, the first of two required courses taught to a cohort of 45 K – 6 PSTs. The course was scheduled for two 3.75 blocks of time per week. During that time students explored concepts related to learning theories, diversity, inclusion, lesson planning, building classroom communities, and teaching with technology. Students also had a field experience that placed them in a K-6 classroom for approximately 13 of the class meeting times.

The electronic media used to engage students in further discussion in the course were e-journals and a listserv. The purpose of the e-journal was to link the field experience more closely with the course by having each student engage in weekly conversation with one of the two professors, referred to as the student's mentor. Discussion via the weekly journal entries was intended to allow for more regular and ongoing interaction about field experiences. Typically in this course students write four reflections over the course of the semester which focused on various aspects of the placement experience. Using e-journals, students would

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write each week, within two or three days of being in the field. The journal entry would be e-mailed to the mentor, who would respond within 2-3 days with comments or questions. Students were provided with prompts if they needed them. The prompts were, "I took part in...; The student I'm observing...; I was surprised...; I'm wondering...; Other things...".

The mentor's intent with the e-journal was to engage students in a one-on-one discussion about field experiences, to strengthen links to the methods class, and to encourage students to reflect further on their personal theories of learning and teaching. Students had approximately thirteen journal entries, although some students chose to be in the field more often, and of those students, some reflected in their e-journal after the other days that they were in the classroom.

The purpose of the listserv was to communicate with the entire class without the necessity of same-time, same-place interaction. Use of the listserv was established at the beginning of the semester for students to subscribe to and was immediately used to pose questions for and by students that furthered discussion and reflection about a range of topics, from class and from the field

RESULTS

During the semester there were approximately 1755 interactions by students or mentors via e-journals for the group of 45 students. During other semesters, students would turn in 4 write-ups about their field experience. If the faculty member responded, that would yield approximately 360 paper interactions.

Both students and faculty accessed the listserv over the course of the semester in order to raise points or ask questions. There were approximately 1100 interactions via the listserv during the semester. Of those 1100, 202 were generated around questions posed for discussion by faculty or by students. Questions were about topics related to the field experience or to the class. Of those topics, nine were generated from students' e-journals. The topics discussed were: PSTs' prior theories about schools and children; reactions to lessons and resources; learning children's names and building community; why children become engaged in lessons; why cooperative learning is successful; motivating unmotivated children; re-engaging children in the learning process; a sexual abuse case; children reacting to an ineffective substitute.

DISCUSSION

During the semester in which e-journals were used, there were almost five times as many interactions between PSTs and faculty about the field experience as compared to other semesters. Further, there were another 152 correspondences exchanged from questions which were first posed in e-journals and then transferred to the listserv for discussion. PSTs described e-journals as a way to receive feedback about what was happening in the field and to make connections

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back to the methods class. They also discussed the power of the journals in helping them make sense for themselves about what they were experiencing in the field. Professors saw several benefits of the use of e-journals. Included were more frequent opportunities to connect with PSTs about their field experiences, the ability to respond quickly with questions and comments prior to the PST's next day in the field, opportunities to connect the field experience to pedagogy and theory-building, and the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the PST rather than just grading an assigned paper. The biggest drawback in using e-journals was the demand on faculty time in responding to 22 – 23 e-journals each week.

In discussions on the listserv, students' responses were not reflecting what was being studied in the methods class. For example, responses to questions regarding how students become engaged in learning indicated that the majority of PSTs responding were focusing on classroom management and control as reasons that children were learning. This concurs with Benson & Meyer (2000). Most responses reflected the belief that children learn because the teacher has created an environment that gives children clear rules and negative consequences if they do not focus on learning. Only eight of the PSTs (17%) responded in a way that reflected the perspective that learners are engaged because the activity is meaningful to them and they are interested in constructing understanding. Of those eight PSTs, it is not known how many responded this way as a result of being in the methods class and how many held that theory about teaching and learning prior to enrolling in the methods class. These responses were used by the professors to continue engaging in activities and discussions with the PSTs about what their own learning theories are.

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