

Chapter 3

Blended Learning to Support Alternative Teacher Certification

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews literature on the use of e-learning to complement and extend preservice and inservice teacher education. It also provides an in depth example of the design and implementation of blended learning for supporting alternative teacher certification. In light of the example, research findings are summarized. The second part of the chapter provides a discussion on the following strategies that led to the successful use of blended learning in alternative teacher certification and explains how applying them can contribute to effective uses of blended learning in other settings: a) leveraging a network of partners, b) designing blended learning to address needs of multiple learners and organizational entities, c) balancing standardization and customization, and d) conducting evaluation and engaging in continuous improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The educational system has been described as disjointed and consisting of loosely coupled systems that have little impact and relation to one another (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976). However, in recent years, online environments and embedded technologies have served as resources for aligning individuals who work in various capacities across

educational systems. Capitalizing on affordances of emerging technologies, individuals and groups can convene in shared spaces for collective work to support student learning (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009), facilitate data-driven decision-making (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2007), enable knowledge-building communities (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991), and support teacher learning (Zhang, 2009). Such online learning

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environments are opportunities for tightening linkages across systems. This work is beginning to take place in preservice and inservice teacher education, where research suggests that e-learning can be effectively employed to meet a variety of learning and practical needs (Fishman, Marx, Best, & Tal, 2003; Whitehouse, Breit, McCloskey, Ketelhut, & Dede, 2006).

Blended learning that combines face-to-face instruction and e-learning is increasingly being used in teacher education for training, induction, and professional development (Barab, MaKinster, & Scheckler, 2004; Dukes & Jones, 2007; Whitehouse, et al., 2006). Blended learning can be implemented in a variety of ways, such as e-learning being supplemental to traditional face-to-face instruction, e-learning replacing face-to-face activities, or as traditional and online offerings that are available to learners on demand (Stacey & Gerbic, 2009).

The objective of this chapter is to explain how blended learning has been used to support alternative teacher certification, which is an emerging aspect of teacher preparation. The chapter summarizes how blended learning was employed in this effort and relays results of research studies. The chapter also describes strategies that enabled the successful design, development, implementation, and continuous improvement of blended learning in this capacity. It also highlights potential directions for future research.

BACKGROUND

Alternative Teacher Certification

Alternative certification is one aspect of teacher preparation where blended learning can be used to support new teachers due to a shortened teacher preparation time and concerns that have been raised about teacher mentoring programs. Over the past 25 years approximately half a million teachers have been credentialed through alternative or

“nontraditional” state-approved programs across the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The expansion of alternative teacher preparation that began in the late 1980s in New Jersey, California, and Texas has continued into the 21st century. Currently, about 600 program providers annually certify about 62,000 teachers through state-defined alternative routes to teacher certification (Feistritzer, 2009). School districts, educational service agencies, universities, four-year colleges, two-year community colleges, for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and partnerships of these entities deliver these programs. Also included are national programs like Troops to Teachers, which serves military personnel moving into teaching positions, and Teach for America, which focuses on new college graduates who did not major in education (Boyd et al., 2008; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Feistritzer & Haar, 2008; Haberman, 2006; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). Combined, these alternative programs are designed to prepare teachers who have the knowledge, dispositions, and self-efficacy to effectively teach students while addressing staffing needs (Chin & Young, 2007; Clewell & Vilegas, 1999; Feistritzer, 2009; Gimbert, Cristol, & Sene, 2007; Guarnio, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006).

Mentoring is a form of professional development that is often provided to beginning teachers to help address knowledge needs, influence teachers’ perspectives (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), and support teacher retention (Chin & Young, 2007; Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Despite the potential for job-embedded mentoring, research suggests that teachers who enter the profession through alternative routes often report feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and unprepared for the realities of teaching (Carter & Keiler, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Gratch, 1998; Isaacs et al., 2007). In particular, teachers have reported a need for additional help with classroom management and motivating students, making effective use of limited instructional planning time, differentiating

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