

Chapter 85

Establishing a Mentoring Relationship Between Pre-Service and Mentor Teachers Through Windows Into Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Windows into Teaching and Learning (WiTL) was a project designed by researchers at one southeastern U.S. University that allowed the facilitation of online clinical experiences for graduate interns during their content area methods course. WiTL was originally developed to address challenges in providing meaningful clinical experiences for interns during online summer coursework. In providing these experiences, a mentoring relationship emerged between the participating practicing and pre-service teachers. This chapter explores those relationships and how they were fostered by the unique features of WiTL, which include online threaded discussions, synchronous and asynchronous viewings of classroom instruction, and text chat communication. These relationships are further supported through WiTL's debriefing process, which allows for immediate interaction between pre-service and mentor teachers. The type of dialogue and collaboration encouraged by WiTL results in strong mentoring relationships. The potential for programs like WiTL to be implemented in PK-12 settings are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Windows into Teaching and Learning (WiTL) was an innovative virtual project developed by researchers in the College of Education at one southeastern university. WiTL was initially developed to address challenges in securing meaningful clinical experiences for students enrolled in online content area methods courses during the summer months when most PK-12 schools are not in session. However, several corollary outcomes of the project emerged, one of which was the potential for programs like WiTL to foster collective mentoring opportunities between experienced mentor classroom teachers and pre-service teacher candidates. Prior research for WiTL investigated student engagement in an online methods course (Petty & Farinde, 2013) and critical thinking/questioning in online methods courses (Heafner, Petty, Farinde & Plaisance, 2013), as well as a recent study that examined the mentoring relationship between pre-service and mentor teachers (Petty, Heafner, Farinde & Plaisance, in review). This chapter describes these mentoring relationships and how they were cultivated through the shared dialogue that WiTL supported.

BACKGROUND

During a typical fall or spring semester, pre-service teachers can easily participate in clinical experiences that allow them to engage in classroom experiences with mentor teachers and their PK-12 students. Not only are these experiences helpful for a pre-service teacher to draw upon during their student teaching experiences, they also prove to be invaluable in preparing the pre-service teachers for life after university coursework when they have a classroom of their own. However, these types of experiences are problematic during summer months when PK-12 schools are not in session. As a result, pre-service teachers in online summer methods courses have observed activities only loosely related to education, such as summer sports camps, youth camps, and academic camps. These contexts are not ideal for pre-service teachers to observe instructional methods for any particular content area. In an effort to provide meaningful clinical experiences in various grade levels and content areas during online summer coursework, researchers developed WiTL as an innovative approach to offering online clinical observation experiences (Heafner & Plaisance, 2013). WiTL also served as a platform for observing differences in instruction delivered through synchronous (real-time) online observations and asynchronous (recorded) teaching episodes, both of which were part of WiTL's design. Furthermore, it allowed course instructors to facilitate and support meaningful dialogue between their students and the mentor teachers they observed as part of the project.

Twelve mentor teachers, each of whom was identified by their principal as an outstanding teacher with at least 5 years of teaching experience, participated in WiTL's implementation. In an effort to promote diverse observation opportunities, WiTL's designers used a middle school and a high school as well as a broad range of grade levels with varying curricula and pedagogy at each grade level. The geographical locations of these schools added to the diversity of the clinical experience. The middle school was located in a high-need rural area of the state while the high school was located in a transient suburban area.

The implementation of WiTL utilized several readily-available technologies. For the synchronous observations, the project designers used the university supported web-conferencing software, Wimba, as well as webcams and wireless headsets. This same technology was used to facilitate the post conference debriefing sessions. To facilitate the asynchronous observations, mentor teachers used webcams to provide pre-recorded videos that were eventually made available to the pre-service teachers. The

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