

Chapter 76

Benefits and Challenges of Collaborative Learning in Online Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Demand for online learning is increasing in US colleges and universities. Learning does not occur in a vacuum; students learn independently and collaboratively. But, is there room for collaborative learning in online courses? This chapter presents information on how a teacher educator designed and implemented collaborative learning in a developmental reading online course for preservice and inservice educators in grades P-12. The author presents details on course design issues, instructional practices, benefits, and challenges associated with collaborative learning in this online course, and implications for further development and evaluation of collaborative learning in teacher preparation programs. The author also provides recommendations from lessons learned for promoting collaboration in online teacher education courses.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will describe how collaborative learning was designed and incorporated in a graduate level online course in reading for preservice and inservice educators. The purpose of this chapter is not to formally assess or evaluate collaborative learning; instead, I will present my rationale for incorporating collaborative learning experiences in an online education course, the ways in which collaborative learning was incorporated, assessed, and monitored, and lessons learned about benefits and challenges associated with collaborative learning in this situated context. I will also reflect on the role of collaborative learning in teacher preparation courses in the context of 21st century learning. Collaborative learning can support online and teacher preparation learning goals and objectives by promoting critical thinking skills, perspective taking, shared knowledge and decision-making, content knowledge, and reflection.

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BACKGROUND

Online Learning and Teacher Education

Although college enrollment overall is in decline, online enrollments have been steadily increasing with each year (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Trends in online education show that approximately 68% of college students who enroll in online courses attend public institutions. In addition, today's college students are career-driven and many report that they enjoy courses that engage them in problem-solving activities that will strengthen their college and career readiness. (Allen & Seaman, 2017; BestColleges.com, 2018).

The convenient accessibility of knowledge, ongoing participation, dialogue, feedback from peers and instructor, availability of formats for presenting materials (Li & Irby, 2008), plethora of readily available tools and resources, learner self-regulation (Li & Irby, 2008; Thomson, 2010), and opportunities for differentiated online instruction (Thomson, 2010) have made online learning a very attractive and relevant learning choice for postsecondary students (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009; Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). Almost 30% of all college and university students now take at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). As adoption of online learning continues to increase, issues related to quality of online learning become vital. Sener (2010) proposes that soon online education will become an integral part of the educational experience.

Although many obstacles still remain to full-scale adoption of online higher education, all higher education students will experience online education at some point of their academic careers. It is predicted that college students will be able to take online or blended programs in almost any discipline (Sener, 2010). The goal of online learning is to improve the quality of the learning experience for students, offer alternative means of learning, and allow them to experiment, become independent learners, and become drivers of change. In spite of its rapid growth and availability, much online learning is still designed using standard educational practices (e.g., lectures, discussions, quizzes, etc.; Norton & Hathaway, 2008).

Concerns with traditional pedagogy facilitated by course management systems raise questions about the quality of the learner's experiences. Factors such as learner self-monitoring; the social, teaching, and cognitive presence of the online instructor or facilitator; instructional design factors; relevancy and quality of content; collaborative learning opportunities; and participants' perceptions of the instruction, collaboration, and online learning all influence the online learning experience. In the context of steady increase in online courses by U.S. postsecondary students, the types of learning students experience online becomes critical to program development, delivery, instruction, student satisfaction, and quality assurance.

Preparing teachers who can effectively meet the needs of all students is a major concern of policy-makers, teacher educators, and the public. Recently, teacher education has been under the political spotlight due to the lack of performance of students in Grades pre-K–12 (P–12) in national and international assessments, the need for technological advancement, and the need to prepare students who will be responsible citizens and effective participants in the global marketplace of the 21st century.

Expectations for teachers are very high in today's era of educational reform. Teachers are expected to be experts in more than one subject. They also need to be prepared to handle the challenges of a growing diverse population of students. Colleges of education need to be preparing teachers for the interconnected world. Teacher preparation should be filled with high quality learning experiences based on sound theoretical principles. Teacher preparation programs should allot significant time for applying theory into practice and reflecting on one's learning (Young, Grant, Montbriand, & Therriault, 2001).

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