

Chapter 61

Expanding Opportunities in Teacher Education: Connecting Visual Arts Teachers With Community via Distance

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ABSTRACT

Initial teacher education has a critical role in preparing future teachers. In an era of increasing distance education, an additional challenge is to effectively prepare pre-service teachers who connect with higher education in an online environment. The diversity of the higher education student cohort studying by distance is significant and can easily be rendered invisible through the 'facelessness' of digital technology. In addressing this challenge, this chapter outlines an innovative program undertaken in two secondary visual arts curriculum subjects delivered in distance mode in a graduate-entry teaching course. The innovation models a practice-based partnership involving higher education and community and culminates in a professional student exhibition. Outcomes include: positive student experience; high levels of achievement; increased civic consciousness and involvement; meaningful integration of cross-curriculum perspectives; and sustained focus on teaching practice. The program provides an example of an integrated use of technology to enhance university teaching and learning with the aim of informing future K-12 educational possibilities.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines an innovation in teacher education that explores the affordances of distance education for preparing secondary visual arts teachers for engagement with community and places of learning, within and beyond schools. This innovation uses the affordances of online and digital technologies to provide a simulated experience of practice that inspires pre-service teachers to understand and use cultural sites within their future teaching. As these pre-service teachers enter the teaching profession and translate their learning into practice, this approach has intergenerational implications for learning and for developing a foundation for cultural practice through school-based education.

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Expanding Opportunities in Teacher Education

In recent years, there have been concerns that the knowledge-based approaches of initial teacher education have been too focused on theoretical aspects of teaching and effectively disconnected from the skill-based practice of teaching (Reid, 2011). In acknowledgement of this concern, there is growing advocacy in teacher education for a shift from a focus on *knowledge* to a focus on *practice* (Grossman et al 2008; Grossman et al 2009; Ball & Forzani, 2009; Reid, 2011). As Ball and Forzani (2009, p.503) note, this requires a move from a focus “on what teachers know to a greater focus on *what teachers do*”, as a matter of attention in *both* theory and practice in teacher education. In proposing such an approach, Grossman calls for an integrated understanding of both practice and theory:

The practices of teaching would provide the warp threads of the professional curriculum, while the knowledge and skill required to enact these practices constitute the weft. (Grossman et al., 2009, p. 277)

This is not a simple additive process. For Grossman (2009, p. 277) it requires the identification of “core practices” – ones that occur regularly and often in teaching. While many academics are working actively in this area, at this stage there are few examples of curriculum approaches that foreground practice in response to such challenges. There are even fewer that illustrate a practice-based approach to teacher education in a distance education environment. As we move increasingly to a blended or online delivery of learning in higher education, considerations of distance education are, arguably, increasingly important.

Distance education has emerged as one of the significant developments in education over the past 25 years, with it becoming now an accepted part of mainstream education (Moore, 2013). It has been defined as “teaching and planned learning in which the teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technology, as well as institutional organization” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p.2). Having a traditional role in broadening access to education, distance education has more recently been acknowledged for its capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning, particularly using new online and digital technologies. However, while there are many benefits in distance education, there are also limitations and difficulties. Quality programs in distance education are reliant on resources and training to communicate in online environments and to take advantage of new digital technologies. In addition, technologies are changing rapidly, requiring constant changes in thinking and practice.

Secondary visual arts is a specialist curriculum area in teacher education. It focuses on providing pre-service teachers with the knowledge, understandings and skills to teach visual arts in secondary schools. Preparing teachers to teach in this area with a focus on what teachers do is particularly challenging in the distance education environment. This is because the work that visual arts teachers do is physical and related to the material environment, in the sense that in their practice visual arts teachers are actively moving around classrooms and environments, engaging with students, with art and with materials. Furthermore, there are aspects of visual arts teaching that are embodied and pathic, meaning that they involve a sense of the body and the self that is not easily communicated through verbal or textual means (Mathewson Mitchell 2013a; 2013b; 2014a, Reid & Mathewson Mitchell, 2015). In this way, teaching visual arts involves a quite distinctive set of teaching practices. Illustrating and engaging with those practices in ways that prepare pre-service teachers who are studying by distance for classroom contexts requires consideration of how those practices might form the basis of teaching and learning in the distinctive distance education mode.

While teaching is largely centred on work in the school and the classroom, teacher education needs to prepare teachers to extend their practice beyond the classroom to incorporate the use of public spaces

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