Chapter 8

Synergy:
Service Learning in Undergraduate Instructional Technology Courses

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ABSTRACT

Synergy describes a situation where the combined efforts are greater than individual parts. Service learning ties together academic content, in this case instructional technology, while providing service. This chapter offers an orientation to an exceptionally rewarding service learning activity in an instructional technology course. Based upon a case study and extensive literature review, this chapter provides best practices for fostering the synergy between service learning and instructional technology courses. This approach increased teacher candidates' exposure to diversity, served community needs, and facilitated candidate practice of skills from instructional technology class.

INTRODUCTION

In instructional technology courses, teacher candidates are taught to use a variety of tools for instruction. Some instructional technology courses require field experience where pre-service teacher candidates observe and interact with in-service teachers and students in schools. A service learning model provides candidates with an opportunity to put the theory they are learning in the classroom into practice while serving the community. Service learning sites provide unique field opportunities

for teacher candidates to work with diverse student populations. The resulting experience can be both rich and rewarding.

Service learning is an activity that meets identified community needs and connects course content with real life experiences. By exposing instructional technology undergraduate teacher candidates to service learning, significant benefits are possible. Howard (1998) also indicated that academic service learning is a synergistic model where the students' experiences in community settings are just as valuable to the students' learning experience as any other element within the course. Citing a reciprocal relationship between service and learning, he posited

that the service experiences of his students both "inform and transform the academic learning and the academic learning informs and transforms the service experience" (p.22). This chapter will explore the benefits of this approach to instructional technology courses through literature review and a case study.

This chapter will:

- Explain the synergistic relationship between instructional technology and service learning in undergraduate teacher preparation.
- Define service learning through both a historical and teacher preparation lens.
- Investigate stakeholder responsibilities and benefits of service learning.
- Detail a case study from a small, private, Midwestern university.
- Discuss best practices, documentation, and integration of experiences.
- Provide recommended readings.
- Establish an agenda for future research.

THE NECESSITY AND COMPLEXITY OF FIELD EXPERIENCES

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) defines field experience as "A variety of early ongoing field-based opportunities in which candidates may observe, assist, tutor, instruct, and/or conduct research. Field experiences may occur in off-campus settings such as schools, community centers, or homeless shelters" (2008, p. 86). Field experiences are considered critical to teacher preparation programs (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1997). This experiential work provides an opportunity for teacher candidates to interact in an authentic instructional setting. Candidates teach, facilitate learning, and connect theory from classes to actual practice in their field placements. Such field experiences promote increased emotional involvement and intrinsic motivation for candidate

success (Casey & Howson, 1993). By integrating field experience partnerships between K-12 schools and universities, positive results have been reported (Clark, Foster & Mantle-Bromley, 2005).

Although field experience has been a long-standing hallmark of teacher education, integrating field experience into educational technology was a relatively new concept just a decade ago. Many reports surfaced in the late 1990s indicating that a restructuring of technology preparation toward integrative models (theory and practice) was necessary in order to prepare teachers for the digital age (Larson & Clift, 1996). According to one report from Willis and Mehlinger, 1996:

Most pre-service teachers know very little about effective use of technology in education and leaders believe there is a pressing need to increase substantially the amount and quality of instruction teachers receive about technology … [T]he virtual universal conclusion is that teacher education, particularly pre-service, is not preparing educators to work in a technology-enriched classroom. (p. 978).

Field experiences integrating technology were recognized as solutions to the deficits in teacher technology skills (Brush, Igoe, Glazewski, Ku, & Smith, 2001). In a 1999 paper, Strudler and Wetzel detailed programs that provided pre-service teachers with technology experiences in the field prior to student teaching. In reaction to the reports and recommended solutions, models were developed that provided teacher candidates with authentic experiences focusing on effective use of instructional media (Dexter & Reidel, 2003; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2008).

More recently, teacher preparation programs began confronting another issue: preparing teacher candidates to teach in diverse settings. Public schools are becoming more diverse, while the teachers remain predominantly White, female, and middle-class (Swartz, 2003). There is a cer-

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