

Chapter 4.7

The Real World Buffalo*: Reality TV Comes to a Charter School

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ABSTRACT

Videoconferencing is one form of distance learning that can enhance teacher-education programs by linking students in higher education with Pre-K–12 schools. As part of a Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to use Technology grant (PT3), a teacher-education program utilized distance learning to link college classes with an urban school. Mediated observations of specific literacy practices were integrated into a traditional introductory literacy course. Preservice teachers observed urban teachers teaching literacy. Immediately following these observations, the preservice teachers were granted the opportunity to reflect on the lesson by conversing with the teachers via distance learning. Initial

findings suggest that students acquired positive attitudes toward teaching in urban classrooms and preferred this virtual field experience to a traditional in-school placement.

INTRODUCTION

Two children collide and tussle over some props in the dramatic play area of a kindergarten classroom. Tempers flare and arms begin to flail. Twenty teacher-education students are sitting in a campus distance learning room miles away from the classroom. Their eyes are fixed on TV monitors watching for the teacher's response to the children's struggle. The teacher calmly intervenes and mediates the struggle. The college instructor "voices over" the ongoing scene, describing to

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-503-2.ch407

the students the importance of body position and eye contact, and explains the conflict resolution strategy of active listening and validating feelings, which the students are observing. She prompts them to listen to the teacher's language and to watch the children's faces for signs of what they might be thinking and feeling. The college instructor briefly connects what the teacher is doing with points made in the chapter on guidance and discipline from the course textbook. Ten minutes later, the kindergarten teacher, on site at the school, enters a distance learning room (the collaboratory) and spends fifteen minutes answering questions and commenting on the 30-minute lesson. Students question the teacher about the conflict, and the teacher provides answers interspersed with her own reflections, a critical component in understanding teacher behavior. She returns to her classroom, and the live video session concludes. The college instructor urges the students to think more about the conflict scenario. She queries them: "In your experiences, what are some of the ways you have seen teachers resolve conflicts among children? What did this teacher do that worked? What did she say? What else might she have done? How do you think the children felt at the end? What will you need to know and be able to do to resolve a conflict with children?"

The setting above describes an ongoing transformation in teacher preparation programs. Research suggests that the more classroom experience that preservice teachers have, the better it is for their expanded repertoire of teaching strategies, by providing for more thoughtful decision-making when responding to children (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Experiences over time are needed for preservice teachers to acquire teaching confidence, make connections from theory to practice, and engage in reflection on teaching; however, time constraints, lack of access to classrooms, school safety issues, and liability concerns are some of the issues prompting teacher-education programs to find alternative ways to design and structure early field experiences (Adcock & Austin, 2002).

Though the nature and frequency of early field experiences is changing and expanding, the diversity, quality, and consistency of the experiences can be greatly enhanced (from what existed in the past) by using the technology available to students and faculty in teacher-preparation programs. The videoconferencing technology described in the opening scenario is just one means of using telecommunications. The range of technologies and their use in teacher-education programs is growing and expanding to include both videoconferencing and Internet protocol videoconferencing.

This chapter describes the collaboration between a teacher-education program and a unique urban charter school equipped with the technology to broadcast live teaching episodes from four primary classrooms. The project began using videoconferencing technology with preservice teachers to conduct guided observations of children and teachers working and learning in an inner-city charter school. Encouraged by positive feedback from students and faculty who used the technology, a pilot program was implemented examining the potential of the technology to mediate reflection with preservice teachers. Two different Preparing Tomorrows Teachers to Use Technology grants (PT3) from the U.S. Department of Education funded the work. The first grant, Project Access¹, enabled the development of the consortium between higher education and a high-need urban school, and provided the technology for real-time video linkages with four primary classrooms. The second PT3 grant, Reflective Mediation Through the Use of Technology², continued the work of the first with the development of a research-based set of best practices for supporting reflection with technology.

CHANGING FIELD EXPERIENCES AND THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Teacher-preparation programs in the sixties and seventies often had the luxury of a laboratory

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