

Chapter 4

Virtually Unprepared: Examining the Preparation of K–12 Online Teachers

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ABSTRACT

At present, there are very few examples of the preparation of teachers for the online environment in teacher education. Even more unfortunate is that less than 40% of all online teachers in the United States reported receiving any professional development before they began teaching online. While some virtual schools provide some training to their own teachers, in most instances, no such training is provided to the school-based personnel. This is unfortunate, as K-12 student success in online learning environments require support from both the online teacher and the local school-based teacher. Clearly, there is a need for teacher education programs to equip all teachers with initial training in how to design, deliver, and – in particular – support K-12 online learning. This chapter begins with an examination of the act of teaching online and how that differs from teaching in a face-to-face environment. Next, the chapter describes existing teacher education initiatives targeted to pre-service teachers (i.e., undergraduate students) and then in-service teachers (i.e., graduate students). This is followed by an evaluation of current state-based initiatives to formalize online teaching as an endorsement area. Finally, a summary of the unique aspects of teaching online and how some initiatives have attempted to address these unique skills, before outlining a course of action that all teacher education programs should consider adopting.

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the first K-12 school to begin using online learning was the private Laurel Springs School in California around 1994. This was followed by the Utah eSchool in 1994-95, which primarily used a correspondence model, but did offer some online courses (Barbour, 2009). In 1996-97, the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) and Virtual High School Global Consortium, which were created using state or federal grants, came into being (Clark, 2007). At the turn of the millennium, Clark (2001) estimated that there were between 40,000 and 50,000 virtual school enrolments. Almost a decade later, Picciano and Seaman (2009) indicated that there were over 1,000,000 students enrolled in online courses, while Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp (2010) reported significant online learning activity in 48 states, and the District of Columbia. In 2006, Michigan became the first state in the US to require that all students complete an online learning experience in order to graduate from high school (a move that has been followed by other states, such as New Mexico, Alabama and Florida). Finally, some have gone so far to predict that the majority of K-12 education will be delivered using online learning by the year 2020 (Christensen, Horn & Johnson, 2008).

Wood (2005) stated there was a “persistent opinion that people who have never taught in this medium [i.e., online] can jump in and teach a class, [however], a good classroom teacher is not necessarily a good online teacher” (p. 36). Roblyer and McKenzie (2000) indicated that many of the factors that make a successful online teacher, such as good communication and classroom organization skills, were similar to those for any successful teacher, yet Davis, Roblyer, Charania, Ferdig, Harms, Compton and Cho (2007) discovered “effective virtual teachers have qualities and skills that often set them apart from traditional teachers” (p. 28). Some of the skills necessary for teaching in an online environment

are consistent with those provided by traditional teacher education programs, but there are other necessary skills that are largely absent (Davis & Roblyer, 2005).

At present, there are very few examples of the preparation of teachers for the online environment in teacher education. Even more unfortunate is that Rice and Dawley (2007) found that less than 40% of all online teachers in the United States reported to receiving any professional development before they began teaching online. While some virtual schools provide some training to their own teachers, in most instances no such training is provided to the school-based personnel. This is unfortunate, as Aronson and Timms (2003) indicated that K-12 student success in online learning environment required support from both the online teacher and the local school-based teacher. Clearly there is a need for teacher education programs to equip all teachers with initial training in how to design, deliver, and – in particular – support K-12 online learning.

This chapter begins with an examination of the act of teaching online and how that differs from teaching in a face-to-face environment. Next, we describe existing teacher education initiatives targeted to pre-service teachers (i.e., undergraduate students), and then in-service teachers (i.e., graduate students). This is followed by an evaluation of current state-based initiatives to formalize online teaching as an endorsement area. Finally, we summarize the unique aspects of teaching online and how some initiatives have attempted to address these unique skills, before outlining a course of action that all teacher education programs should consider adopting.

EXAMINING ONLINE TEACHING

Many of us can think of instances where we thought poorly of our professor’s ability to teach. Perhaps it was due to poor preparation, a lack of content knowledge, or an inability to explain complex

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