

Chapter 7

Training Teachers for Virtual Classrooms: A Description of an Experimental Course in Online Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The increased demand for online instruction within higher and K-12 education has created a need for teacher education programs to provide pre-service and practicing teachers with training in online pedagogy; however, research has shown that such courses are rare within most teacher training programs. This chapter describes “Theory and Practice in Online Education,” an experimental course designed to train teachers for virtual instruction that was offered by the first author in Spring 2011. In this course, students explored the history of online education, online learning theories, the creation of online communities, online assessments, and ways to differentiate online courses for learners with special needs. Students were then able to put this theoretical knowledge into practice by experiencing various forms of synchronous and asynchronous communication and designing their own online course. The authors provide this description in hopes that others may use it as a starting point to create their own courses in online pedagogy.

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INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this chapter can be traced back to a transformational experience in the first author's professional career. At the end of his first year of teaching high school social studies, the first author was asked by his district technology supervisor to design and teach an online United States Government course for the district's new e-learning program. After accepting the task, he quickly realized that he knew very little about developing online curricula. Without much guidance, he created a course that *seemed* like a good online experience—his students visited websites, submitted work electronically, and discussed content-related topics on the course discussion board. Yet, in the years that followed, he taught that course several times, often growing frustrated at his students' lack of engagement with both the course content and the other students in the course, especially when compared to the academic performances of students in his face-to-face classes. It was only years later, as a doctoral student exposed to literature on online education, that he realized how fundamentally flawed his approach to designing and teaching that course had been.

Sadly, this type of experience with online teaching is not unique. Universities and school districts around the world are increasing their use of online delivery systems, but the preparation of educators specializing in online instruction is not keeping up with the demand for quality online education. Research suggests that distance education programs have the potential to offer instruction that is equivalent to and may even exceed that which is found in face-to-face classrooms (Bernard et al., 2004), but only if online education is subject to the same types of quality-control measures that are currently being used to monitor face-to-face instruction. One such measure is effective teacher training, and we believe, as do others (e.g., Davis & Roblyer, 2005; National Education Association, 2006), that teacher education programs need to

take greater responsibility in preparing pre-service and practicing teachers for virtual classrooms.

This chapter describes an experimental course the first author offered in Spring 2011 entitled *Theory and Practice in Online Education* that we believe can serve as a model for the preparation of online teachers. In this course, students experienced multiple forms of synchronous and asynchronous communication and explored the history of online education, online learning theories, the creation of online communities, online assessments, and ways of differentiating online courses for learners with special needs. The culminating project in the course required students to create their own online course using Blackboard technology that implemented the best practices discussed and modeled in class.

BACKGROUND

Current State of Virtual Teacher Preparation

Over the past two decades, online education has become a staple of higher education and, increasingly, K-12 education (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Although research on the perceived cost efficiency of online education is mixed (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Njenga & Fourie, 2010), increased budget concerns and advancements in technology have forced universities and school districts to consider online education as a way to reduce costs and offer students the flexibility to take courses off campus (Burbules, 2004; Journell, in press). Many universities are increasingly offering certain programs exclusively online (e.g., Haythorhwaite & Kazmer, 2004), and open universities that operate completely online are becoming more popular throughout the world for both students and faculty (Ng, 2006). Within K-12 education, research has found that many nations have begun to offer “virtual high schools” for stu-

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