

Chapter 9

Creating Virtual Collaborative Learning Experiences for Aspiring Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Finding time for reflection and collaboration presents challenges for teachers. Combined with this are feelings of isolation from colleagues. Web 2.0 tools can assist in alleviating these difficulties for teachers. This chapter discusses the potential of Web 2.0 tools, the development and uses of these tools, and considerations to make when using Web 2.0 tools. The chapter also presents ways colleges of education can support reflection and collaboration while diminishing feelings of isolation. The experiences of one instructor in implementing Web 2.0 strategies in Master's of School Administration classes are shared throughout the chapter to support the rationale for utilization of Web 2.0 tools.

INTRODUCTION

There is a changing definition of school leadership. School leadership is no longer the domain of principals, assistant principals, or department heads. School leadership today is much broader and includes the entire professional staff (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007).

As examples, the recently implemented North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (2009) includes teacher leadership as the first of five major evaluated areas, and in part says: "Teachers demonstrate leadership in the school. Teachers work collaboratively with school personnel to create a professional learning community"(p.20). The North Carolina School Executive Evalua-

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tion Process (2008) under Standard I, Strategic Leadership, describes the following expectation: “Distributive Leadership: The principal creates and utilizes processes to distribute leadership and decision-making throughout the school” (n.p.). “School leaders” in this chapter refers to both teachers and principals.

BACKGROUND

Much is unchanged about education in the last 90 years—especially the processes that generally organize, frequently direct, often confine, and ultimately determine student learning. What have changed dramatically are the expectations of both students and teachers. And, the old processes cannot produce what they were never intended to produce. An aphorism of organizations is that when good people are caught in bad (or ineffective) processes, the bad processes overcome the best of intentions. This juxtaposition of the old processes and the new expectations creates the critical question for this chapter: *If the processes that underpin the profession in the K-12 environment have little changed, but the expectations have greatly changed, how can the use of technology create new processes?*

ISOLATION FROM COLLEAGUES: A SIGNIFICANT PROBLEM FOR TEACHERS

A key practice or process which separates education as a profession from most others is the isolation of the professionals from other professionals. This practice is found throughout the profession and in schools particularly. Teachers teach classes of students normally with the classroom door closed and even more archetypically without professional contact and collaboration with other

teachers. There is little dispute that collegiality and collaboration with associates plays in high stressed professional cultures. Where this practice confounds high expectations for learning is when children in a classroom experience problems in learning, the solution to problems in the traditional/current process lies with the expertise of the individual teacher not with a group of professional colleagues. With the increased demands to teach more and at a higher intellectual level, Richard Elmore (2000) wrote that isolation is the enemy of innovation and the development of unique solutions to learning problems.

A NOT-SO-OBVIOUS SOLUTION FOR ISOLATION, COLLABORATION, AND REFLECTION

Like Elmore (2000), others, both in and outside of education have echoed the issues associated with professionals working in isolation. According to Bridgstock, Dawson, and Hearn (2011),

“[M]ost theorists now agree that while individual skills and knowledge, and traits like personality and intelligence, are important foundations for innovation, in actuality innovation thrives on social interaction and collaborative efforts. It involves the active combination of people, knowledge, and resources” (p. 105).

Schmoker (2006) wrote that the typical school functions as a group of private freelancers united by the school parking lot. Michael Fullan (2001), in *Leading in a Culture of Change*, writes of the importance of social learning or learning in context. “Learning in the setting where you work, or learning in context, is the learning with the greatest payoff because it is more specific (customized to the situation) and because it is social (involves a group)” (p.136).

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