Chapter 7
Virtual Interdisciplinary Experiences for Teachers of Writing: Considerations for Implementation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter describes how virtual fieldwork was perceived by candidates in two teacher education programs: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Adolescent English (AE) as they partnered with English Language Learners (ELLs) in a middle school and college setting. By jointly examining findings from these parallel initiatives, the affordances and constraints of technology as an interdisciplinary collaborative tool may be better understood. Overall, teacher candidates reported a desire for more such "real" fieldwork, even further contact with ELLs, and continued hands-on work with the texts of these diverse writers. Unanticipated findings relate to the benefits of the projects to the cooperating teachers at partner schools, who became involved in professional learning as the demands of the technology were negotiated and partnership with the university was strengthened. The projects also underscore the ways in which technology-based collaborations must be supervised and supported.

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ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Technology is often viewed as a bridge between disciplines—a means to facilitate interdisciplinary collaborative work. For those invested in the preparation of teachers to work with ELLs, interdisciplinary work is essential, as discipline-area teachers (Science, Mathematics, Social Studies, Literature and beyond) must work alongside TESOL specialists in order to meet the content and language demands faced by these pupils. Educators of ELLs and second language (L2) writers need to be expert interdisciplinarians whether they work in K-12 or higher education, since multilingualism should not hinder a learner's movement through rigorous academics, but rather, enhance it. The focus of our chapter is the use of technology to foster educators' dispositions toward the interdisciplinary collaboration that will be vital to their and their students' careers.

In teacher education, collaborative projects often include Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) since interactive Web-based tools have the potential to extend and open up classrooms to multiple stakeholders such as care-givers, teacher candidates, students, teacher-trainers, librarians, mentors, content experts, community members, and/or administrators. Blogs, for instance, have been used to connect teacher candidates with students like the future ones they will someday teach (Gibson & Kelland, 2009). Today, many educators have participated in educational activities such as online bookclubs based upon the belief that education should be open, ongoing, and relevantly reinforced in "real life" (Groenke, 2010; Scharber, 2009). Online extension projects hold much promise in environments where ratios average 30 students to one teacher, or said differently, where as few as five minutes and fifteen seconds of individual teacher attention is potentially provided to each child (Laurillard, 2008).

Most classroom teachers are open to "e-pal" exchanges between their students and competent tutors, particularly those enrolled in schools of education, since such exchanges increase individual attention given to students. Blogs or online discussion boards tend to be used for this purpose, and, in the authors' experiences, tend to be moderated or supervised. The asynchronous nature of these tools provides certain advantages:

- Both supervisor and cooperating classroom teacher can intervene seamlessly.
- Posts are automatically time-stamped and saved, providing an automatic record of tutors' professional interactions with students.
- The recorded interactions are "open displays" that can be mined for personal and group reflection and evaluation (Hounsell, 2007); the interaction is held still in order to generate even more interaction from multiple parties.