

Chapter 34

Virtual School of the Smokies

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of communication on the Internet has facilitated the sharing of information within and across organizations around the world. This chapter describes how a virtual environment called the Virtual School of the Smokies serves as a support system for preservice and inservice teachers in an online program at a regional state university in Southeastern United States that enrolls students from the United States as well as other countries. Difficulties with development of community and professional identity in online teacher education programs and the role of the Virtual School in addressing these issues are discussed. The role of universal design for learning in virtual environments is also addressed. Surveys were conducted with students to ascertain which resources in the school were used most frequently and what suggestions they had for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Whether on campus or off campus, preservice and inservice teachers need support to help ensure their success. Online facilities can provide levels of support and resources beyond those that can be provided by traditional face-to-face means. The Virtual School of the Smokies (VSS) is an example of how educators around the world can work together to share resources and expertise. The Virtual School project provides an inclusive school-design setting universally accessible that

includes a rich variety of resources, windows into classrooms, wisdom of experienced teachers, and bridges to connect teacher candidates locally and transnationally. It also provides an online model of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for teacher education candidates.

Through funding by a grant, Western Carolina University faculty developed the VSS to enhance the educational experience of teacher education candidates in our special education distance graduate and residential undergraduate programs in the College of Education and Allied Professions. The special education undergraduate program is an inclusion program in which teachers become

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dually certified in elementary and special education. The special education graduate programs, the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) and the Master of Arts in Education (MAEd), are totally online with students both internationally, and regionally based. There are concentrations in the following areas: general curriculum, adapted curriculum, and gifted education. In addition to the site-based and online programs, the university has had an education program in Jamaica for over 40 years. Jamaican teachers are able to get their bachelor's degree in early childhood, middle grades, or special education and/or their master's degree in educational administration. The courses are taught face-to-face by university faculty at four locations in Jamaica, with students coming to campus for one summer of their program. As students of the university, the Jamaican teachers receive the same online support as the traditional students on campus and distance students.

The VSS serves several purposes. First, it provides all students a sense of "place" contributing to a sense of community and Online Human Touch (Betts, 2008) in our courses and in our programs. Second, the VSS aids students in the development of a professional identity as it provides prospective teachers an audience for their professional work and a connection to practicing teachers. Third, the VSS serves as an online model for Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Finally, the VSS provides a valuable repository of resources for our students, our graduates, and teachers in the region and internationally.

The VSS, just as a real school, includes four general education classrooms (grade groups: K-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12) and discipline-specific classroom/resource rooms (Science Lab, Exceptional Children Resource Room, Academically or Intellectually Gifted Resource Room); Principal's Office; Media Center; Teachers' Lounge; Family Resource Center; and Counselor's Office. Upon entering a room in the VSS, a page is displayed with categorized resources and materials germane to the room which include video clips of best

practices, examples of exemplary lesson plans, ideas for materials and resources, and comments from experienced teachers. The VSS provides candidates and practitioners with authentic examples of teaching practices, strategies, methodology, and connections to others in the field. It shows future teachers how content from education courses ties together (continuity between the disciplines) as well as assists candidates to see the application of classroom theory in a realistic, pragmatic setting.

BACKGROUND

With the advent of Web 2.0 tools, online communities are growing at a rapid pace and developing new ways to use virtual environments. Learning in mainstream United States culture has traditionally been an individualized activity. In the public educational institutions in the country, knowledge is transmitted from the teacher to the student and teachers are told what and how to teach. In this age of accountability, learning is assessed by high-stakes tests where knowledge is demonstrated out of context and teachers are pressured to teach to the test to in order to raise test scores (Au, 2011; Berliner, 2011; Hursh, 2008; Stillman, 2011). The advent of new technologies requires educators to rethink their epistemological views about the nature of teaching and learning. A social learning theory offers a different perspective on learning; one that assumes that learning is essentially a social activity (Wenger, 1998). That learning is a social activity is supported by the research on how people learn (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) as well as the research in neuroscience (Bennett & Bennett, 2011). We all belong to communities of practice (CoPs) in our personal lives as well as our work lives, some formal and others more informal (Wenger, 1998). With the new emerging technologies, businesses, governments, and educational institutions all over the world are using online communities of practice for professional development and lifelong learning (Bowersox, 2011;

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