

Chapter 36

Constructing Community in Higher Education Regardless of Proximity: Re-Imagining the Teacher Education Experience within Social Networking Technology

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly global world where students are increasingly mobile and not bound by the same rules of proximity as before (Beckmann, 2010; Healey, 2008), it becomes critically important to understand how learning can take place and how community can be built through virtual communities. This chapter reports the results of a study that investigated whether preservice and beginning teachers involved in the dialogue of an emergent online social networking community engage in meaningful educational and professionally enriching experiences. The researchers specifically examined how online social networking in teacher education programs addresses issues related to: (1) the isolation students feel while in the field; (2) the lack of community and dialogue among students; (3) the disconnectedness between classroom knowledge and field experiences; (4) the limited reflective practices observed among novice teachers; and (5) the need to appreciate multiple perspectives and diverse cultures.

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly global world where students are increasingly mobile and not bound by the same rules of proximity as before (Beckmann, 2010; Healey, 2008), it becomes critically important to understand how learning can take place and how community can be built through virtual communities. Technological developments have dramatically altered conceptions of the teaching and learning process including how curriculum is presented, how students engage the content, and how the students interact with the instructor and with each other (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Mayer, 2002; Mayer & Johnson, 2008; Lajoie & Azevedo, 2006; Pea, 2004).

Evolving from its earliest use as an information resource, the Internet has become increasingly interactive and widespread. When used as a communication device, individuals can participate in incredibly complex networks of information and resources. Beckmann (2010) indicated that “mobile technologies offer opportunities for ongoing access to distance education that can be pursued off-campus and transnationally with the same peer-centered approaches available on-campus, enhancing authenticity of both content and context” (p. 159). Learning communities emerge as students access virtual classrooms, online collaborative learning groups, and peer networks. As a result, it is vital to investigate electronic learning situations wherein students share ideas and resources with peers and experts. Nowhere is that more important than in teacher preparation programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, where candidates are learning how to engage their own students and develop a practice that will allow them to be successful in their own classrooms.

In 2005, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Panel of Research and Teacher Education was charged with providing a critical and evenhanded analysis of the empirical evidence relevant to practices and policies in pre-

service teacher education in the United States. The result was a research agenda for teacher education that outlined topics that required further study to enhance what is known about the impact of teacher preparation and the influence of various practices and policies. One such recommendation was to conduct research on teacher educators, teacher education students/graduates, and the instructional interactions in teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Expounding upon this charge, Kenneth Zeichner (2005) noted, “. . . we know very little about the nature of instructional interactions between teacher educators and their students in teacher education classrooms. We need research that explores the process of teacher education both within the . . . classroom and in the supervisory situations that exist in internship settings” (p. 748).

Teacher preparation must advance preservice and in-service teacher backgrounds in educational technologies, in addition to the pedagogical skills to successfully incorporate these technologies into their instruction. If innovative, student-centered ideas can be implemented with technological tools in teacher training programs, preservice teachers will be simultaneously exposed to both the tools and teaching practices of the 21st century. Additionally, the teachers’ practice will more closely reflect the technological expertise of their K-12 students. Finally, the meaningful interaction between teacher educators and their candidates through new social networking technologies allows for learning to take place as never before in the field of teacher education. Online social networking offers a unique venue through which candidates transform from student into teacher through reflection, peer interaction, and collaboration, yet precious little is known about its impact on teacher candidates preparing to become teachers.

Goos and Bennison (2008) suggested that emergent online communities, in which participants are able to build and alter the community as it grows, are more sustainable than designed communities, in which structure is largely imposed by the initial creator. This critical factor is one of

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