

Reflection Tools in Teacher Education Classes: An Analysis of Implementation in Online, Hybrid, and Traditional Environments

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ABSTRACT

This paper will introduce the nature of reflective tools in online, hybrid, and traditionally formatted teacher education courses. The specific context of implementation and impact on the quality of reflection for teaching candidates will be discussed. Examples of assignment prompts and recommendations for future use will be shared.

Keywords: blogs, e-learning, teacher education, reflection, discussion boards

TECHNOLOGY AND TODAY'S LEARNER

Current data indicates that the United States has almost four million students enrolled in online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2008). This number surpasses the enrollment in the traditional campus setting. So what constitutes this large number and what is the big draw? Research states that online classes can prove to be less intimidating, and those students can experience a sense of flexibility when facing overwhelming daily challenges such as work or family demands (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Zhou & Zhang, 2008). Our modern lives are creating less time to spend on educational programs, so we need to find ways that will accommodate our busy lives. With technology becoming more and more integrated into our lifestyles, it is plausible we would engage in more online offerings (Ozkan, 2010).

Preparing teachers who can effectively meet the needs of today's schools is a challenging task. In an effort to accomplish that task, more and more universities are expanding their education programs to include online certificates, courses, and degrees. When compared to face-to-face instruction, ratings for online teacher preparation programs have been found to be higher, as a result of more innovative online teaching and learning practices (Chiero & Beare, 2010).

Today's learner thinks and processes information differently from their predecessors (Prensky, 2001). The Millennial generation typically uses technology to learn more fluently than their counterparts, and making learning creative is important to their achievement in the classroom (Teaching Tips, 2011).

Online learning is a solution for engaging 21st century learners and for preparing them for the classroom where they will have to be technologically savvy. In addition, online programs offer flexibility to students and to professors, increasing opportunities for learners to experience classroom observations and practice teaching.

PRODUCING REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS

According to Larrivee (2006), reflective practice can be viewed as "the culmination of all other forms of reflection in that it is undertaken not solely to revisit the past but to guide future action" (p. 5). While courses with opportunities for pre-service teachers to "practice" appear infrequently in teacher education programs, several required pedagogy and strategy courses lend themselves to set the stage or foundation for reflective practice. Working with and educating pre-service teachers (or trainee teachers) provides university professors the opportunity to guide pre-service teachers to develop their ability to engage in reflection – reflection on professional readings, reflection on classroom observations, and reflection on their own teaching practices.

Collaboration with peers offers an extension of this reflective process which, according to Parsons & Stephenson (2005), includes a wider range of understanding and perspectives. In addition, learning to reflect affords these pre-service teachers the experience of drawing on a wider range of knowledge and understanding--reflection in

which they draw upon their metacognitive knowledge and skills (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005, pp. 98-101). Moreover, frequently asking students to “discuss together an aspect of practice they have observed or experienced, or read about” appears to encourage dialogue without the pressure of a specific reflective activity (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005, p.104). Using online discussion boards and blogs stimulates such collaboration and discussion. Reflective collaboration using the knowledge-building framework facilitates the process of student articulation and documentation of their development (Chitpin, 2006, p. 81).

By designing assignments that require college students to describe what they have learned, professors demonstrate essential elements for preparing all students to be self-regulated learners through responsibility for describing what they have learned (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005, p. 101). In turn, pre-service teachers have practiced and learned key strategies for designing similar lessons for their future students to assist them in becoming self-regulated learners. Through a growing understanding of their own values and beliefs—developing an increased awareness of their learning—metacognition strengthens.

While it is simple for a professor or teacher to tell students “Reflect on what you have read” or “Reflect on the lesson you just observed,” reflection assignments need to be structured within an explicit framework that allows students to experience the “process of reflection” through clearly defined situations (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005, p. 104). Professors need to develop set of focus questions for pre-service teachers to respond to during their reflection. This “guided reflection framework” is useful in the development of reflection using prompts to help students to regulate and monitor their cognition (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005, p. 104).

Research conducted by Parsons and Stephenson (2005) reflects comments from teachers who engaged in reflective collaboration: tasks led to “deeper thinking about what was actually happening” and they “brought into focus issues which could have been lost” (p.113). Another teacher comments that the tasks were helpful because they allowed the students “to observe and develop specific areas rather than doing general observations” (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005, p. 113). Such comments support the importance of providing quality opportunities for our pre-service teacher candidates to develop the process of critically reflecting on their experiences – a process that does “not come naturally to most teachers” (Yang, 2009, p. 12).

Perceiving “reflection” as a knowledge-building framework sets the stage for students to go “beyond description of incidents and issues, and to explore different perspectives, alternative ways of understanding and responding” (Chitpin, 2006, p. 80). Chitpin (2006) further tells us that reflection aids in identifying learning derived from specific experiences and allows us to then determine courses of action for achieving certain objectives (p. 80).

BENEFITS OF BLOGS

The interest in new media for teaching and learning has highlighted the potential of innovative software and hardware for education. This has included laptops, handhelds, wireless systems and Web-based learning environments. Most recently, however, this interest has focused on blogs and blogging (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). With such a wide range of opportunities to promote learning comes a special challenge of how to operationalize educational blogging (Dent & Yuen, 2009). The open, flexible nature of blogs encourages dialogue among the discussion participants (Richardson, 2003).

Paper-based journals have been used extensively in promoting individual reflection in learning. It is argued that blogs share with these traditional journals the affordances for reflective thinking and have the potential to excel as tools for promoting learning by enabling peer interaction and collaboration (Hall & Davison, 2007). However, while the use of blogs and varied interactive instructional technologies is increasing in online environments, little research exists on the benefits of blogs. Research does support, however, the need for interactivity in online classrooms, and the importance of critical reflection for teachers’ professional growth. Successful teachers are fully engaged in the reflective process. In addition, they are intentional, responsible, and committed to growing professionally throughout their careers. Finally, to improve their own performance, they make time to consider what they do day-to-day (Corcoran & Leahy, 2003).

NATURE OF COURSES

Course #1: The Reading in the Secondary Content Areas course is an online, required course for teaching candidates seeking secondary or all level certification. Its course description designates the course as one that, “incorporates the study of reading skills, learning and study and higher level thinking skills development in the content areas. The course covers the readability of curriculum materials, adapting learning experiences, planning curriculum to accommodate student diversity in reading ability, and assessing student learning” (University, 2012). This is the only reading course required for these candidates. Therefore, its emphasis lies in

practical implementation of reading, writing, and vocabulary strategies for content area classrooms. There is a 15-hour field component required for the course. The class included in this study had 35 students.

Course #2: Reading in the Content Areas, K-8 is a face-to-face course that is required of all elementary education majors. It is usually among the first education courses that these majors take. The course emphasizes instructional techniques and materials that can be used in the teaching of reading across the disciplines. The class that participated in the study had 13 students.

Course #3: Social Studies: The Instructional Strategies for the Elementary & Middle School Teachers is a face-to-face course with a field-based practicum component that emphasizes the integration of research and theories about the processes of learning social studies in the elementary and middle school. This is a required course for all K-8 education majors and ECH-12 special education majors. Problem solving, critical thinking, and citizenship are stressed. Additionally, emphasis is placed on integrating social studies with reading and literacy to include a variety of reflective writing assignments. Initial reflections are individual writing assignments turned in to the professor. While out in the field, pre-service teacher candidates reflect using Discussion Board threaded discussions. This online component appears extremely beneficial in providing support to the teacher candidates and opportunities to expand their learning as they view and respond to experiences of their peers. There were 41 participants in this course.

IMPLEMENTATION OF BLOG IN ONLINE COURSE

In this course, referred to previously as Course #1, the blog had two purposes: 1) To introduce future teachers to ways they could integrate technology into their own classroom, and 2) To give them an opportunity to simultaneously reflect on and collaborate with peers regarding their field experiences. Candidates were given an open-ended prompt initially that asked them to share their experiences, observations, and suggestions for what they viewed in their classroom observations. The prompt utilized for this blog was as follows:

Greetings, future teachers! This blog has been created so that you, (course #) students, can ask questions, discuss strategies, and comment on past and future teaching experiences regarding reading in the content areas. Please use this blog as a place to share strategies you are excited to use, as well as those you would like to learn more about. I look forward to reading what you have to say! Please include insightful, proofread blog posts of at least 150 words or more. Additional instructions on timing of posts, creating an account, etc. are posted for students in Blackboard.

As time with the blog progressed, candidates were encouraged to think about what was working in the lessons from their classroom observations, what was not, and how they would teach something differently, or enhance a lesson, through the use of reading, writing, and vocabulary strategies. Candidates were given a span of six weeks to blog, during which at least two posts were required. Students could not make back-to-back posts and should have posted over a span of at least two weeks so they had new experiences to share. In addition, the instructor reviewed the posts each week and facilitated the conversation through a response and additional questions for them to consider. The blog in this course was created using Blogger.com.

IMPLEMENTATION OF BLOG IN TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENT

In this course, previously referred to as Course #2, students were required to read five trade books in each of the following content areas: science, social studies, math, and English/language arts. Each student wrote an initial blog entry discussing what they noticed about the instructional applicability of the books they read and posted the entry. The candidate then responded to the initial posts of four of their class peers. The specific blog prompt for this blog assignment was as follows:

The English/Language Arts Books Discussion will be held using a Blog format. All class members are blog members with the capability of submitting blog entries and comments.

Grading requirements and submission requirements have changed because of the features available through the blog. For this book discussion, annotated bibliographies will be graded and recorded in the Grade Center separate from the blog; the annotated bibliography remains worth 15 points and for this assignment may contain one novel, one book of poetry, one ABC book, and 2 books that relate to writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation, or other language arts topics. The blog portion of the assignment will be graded through Blackboard. Candidates are required to make a blog entry (10 pts) and to make comments on the entries of four of their peers (2.5 pts each for a total of 10 pts). In total, the blog assignment will be worth 20 points.

Blog entries should present your basic analysis and evaluation of the 5 books that you read for this assignment. I encourage you to express yourselves fully and completely in your entries. The more detail that you provide in your blog entry the easier it will be for other group members to put themselves into your shoes and submit meaningful comments. After all members have had an opportunity to post their

entry, then each blogger should come back into the blog and submit comments to four of their peers. Make text-to-text connections between books read or topics addressed. Feel free to ask each other questions when you don't understand a comment, an allusion, or a word. The only dumb questions are the unasked ones!

Each blog member is expected to post their blog entry between __ and __. Blog comments should be posted between __ and __.

The tone of entries and comments should be courteous, respectful, insightful, and encouraging. Alternative viewpoints are welcome. No texting language or abbreviations allowed. It would be a good idea to proofread entries before submitting them. Mechanics do count. No late entries or comments accepted.

The time span between initial entries and reply comments was brief (2-5 days). Some students expressed difficulty with remembering to re-enter the blog to post reply comments.

IMPLEMENTATION OF DISCUSSION BOARD IN HYBRID COURSE

In this course, referred to as Course #3, teacher candidates were given two reflection assignments to be accomplished during the face-to-face portion of the semester (about five weeks). The first reflection was related to a professional article that the instructor assigned; therefore, all students read the same material, prepared their reflection on in a Word document, then brought to class and shared their responses.

The second reflection provided the teacher-candidates the opportunity to locate a professional journal article of their interest, then write the reflection and bring to class to share. The final two reflections were accomplished within the Discussion Board component of Blackboard. Each teacher-candidate was to write an initial post, then respond to the posts of three of their peers.

The discussion board prompt utilized for this assignment was as follows:

Please consider your recent Social Studies teaching experiences. Think about the students in your group and/or classroom--and consider several "positive or enlightening student responses" that you have observed. For example, "responses" do not need to be verbal--they could be facial expressions or body language--small chats between students--displaying how the student(s) feel about the assignment or what they are learning.

Now--choose JUST ONE of these positive responses, and post your comments in this Discussion Board.

Next--read some of the other teacher candidates' posts--and comment on two (2) of your peers' statements.

YOU'RE DONE!!! Enjoy!

RESULTS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Course #1

The instructor noted excitement on behalf of some learners to utilize a new tool in the online class. Other, less technologically savvy or unfamiliar learners exhibited frustration for the same reason. It should be noted that it is often assumed college students of the current generation of students have access and experience with a number of technologies. That is not always the case, as this instructor discovered.

The blog yielded more insightful responses as a result of a more open-ended blog prompt, in some cases. The instructor found that the blog provided a more open forum of discussion, compared to inhibited discussion board forums. In addition, a higher quality of reflection was produced from students, as they used the prompt to guide their field work observations and focus their attention in the classroom. Finally, the instructor noted what appeared to be less forced, and more authentic, peer feedback in the blogs, compared to previous experience with other reflection tools like discussion boards.

Course #2

The blog entries and response posts gave the instructor visible evidence of the quality of discussion that ensued. The quality of the initial post affected the quality of the peer responses. The better initial entries drew better peer responses and were more frequently responded to than poorer quality initial entries. Increased instructor direction and the provision of instructor examples improved the quality of both initial entries and peer responses. The last day of class students were asked to evaluate the three different methods of book discussion (face-to-face,

discussion board, blog) that were used during the course of the semester. Students preferred face-to-face discussion because of the direct interaction, which allowed students to give and receive immediate feedback in the form of oral questions, facial expressions, and body language. Students also noted that they enjoyed being able to see and handle the actual books.

Students in this elementary reading class noted the following positive aspects to using blogs as a modality for discussion: Every student could see every other student's entry, allowing students to read other posts before writing her own. They enjoyed being able to choose whom they responded to and liked the flexibility in timing that the blogs encouraged.

These students noted minor problems with use of a blog as a modality for discussion: Some students noted lack of home Internet access and lack of experience with blogging as a means of communication. Others missed the interaction of the face-to-face discussion. Some complained that the discussion turned into a writing assignment. Some students noted problems with remembering to re-enter the blog in order to post peer responses. Some thought the initial entries tended to be lengthy and repetitive.

Course #3:

The instructor noted a relaxed form of writing within the Discussion Board assignments that reflected excitement about teaching and the responses of their students (across grade levels, K-8th). Initial posts reflected what teaching strategies were successful and provided insight into some that required modification. Sincere comments revealed an increased awareness of the importance of using manipulatives at all grade levels and a surprised recognition that even sixth graders had a desire to learn. Teacher-candidates utilized positive phrases when responding to their peers, providing encouragement and support for the quality of teaching that had been accomplished. The second discussion board assignment revealed an improved quality of initial posts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE USE

Based on the implementation of blogs and discussion boards in these three classes, the researchers have reached the following recommendations for future use:

- Limit blog pages to 20 students.
- Provide a longer span of time for students to use blog on a continuous basis.
- Allow students to add video of their reflection or classroom teaching to their blog posts for visual enhancement and further collaboration and commentary by peers and instructor.
- Be sure the prompt used is reflective of the type of posts and responses you want.
- Increase the number of required posts.
- Point out the importance of the blog reflection, and of reflective practice in general, to candidates prior to the blog assignment.
- Model setting up an account and blog posts for candidates.
- Assign student facilitators for each week of blog usage.

CONCLUSIONS

The author's implementation of blogs and discussion boards provided them with a better understanding of the types of prompts that promote collaboration and reflection, the most appropriate context for using reflective tools, and necessary steps for making future use of these tools more effective in the classroom. Candidate reflections and instructor observations indicated that students' writing appeared to be more relaxed, they shared encouragement with their peers, and generally provided quality responses. In some cases, however, students needed additional understanding of the assignment or the technology required to complete their posts. As technology continues to advance and teacher education courses continue to evolve in format, it is important for instructors to be aware of ways to keep their candidates engaged and prepared for 21st century classrooms. Blogs and discussion boards are two venues that educators can utilize to ensure this growth occurs.

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