

Developing Online Communities of Practice in Preservice Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Despite attempts to encourage greater teacher collegiality, the privacy of the classroom persists. Online communication tools offer opportunities for teachers to overcome these boundaries in professional communities of practice. This study of two cohorts of preservice teachers sought to determine if they were successful in building community in class and online and to examine factors that may have enhanced or impeded their ability to create community. Findings suggest that the physical and pedagogical contexts of the classroom and the way the communication tools are implemented are important factors in their use.

KEYWORDS

Preservice teacher development, collaborative learning online, communities of practice, community tools

INTRODUCTION

Despite a variety of strategies for encouraging greater collegiality in teaching, teaching remains, for many, a private endeavor. Yet, studies of co-present and emerging online teacher communities (Calderwood, 2000; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2000; Schlager, Fusco, & Schank, 1998; Westheimer, 1998) demonstrate the potential for teachers to develop effective communities of practice. Preservice teacher development is an ideal time to introduce teachers to the tools that can provide them opportunities for continued learning within a community of practice online. What follows is a report of a study of two cohorts of preservice teachers – secondary science and secondary English education majors – who began to build communities of practice both in class and online.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

In the 1990s, the College of Education at the University of Missouri revised both its curriculum and its technology infrastructure, building a new computer lab and providing laptop computers to everyone in the program. The Center for Technology Innovations in Education developed new software to facilitate preservice teachers' reflection, communication, and collaboration—the Interactive Shared Journaling System. Increasing interest in and demand for tools that provided course information online provided incentive for the College to license Blackboard's CourseInfo.

METHODS

Sample

This study is part of an NSF-funded study of the class of 2001 throughout their time in the teacher development program. It focuses on two cohorts of preservice teachers (PSTs) in secondary science education and secondary English education, over the course of their last two years in the program. Six PSTs in each cohort were selected for the case study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher observed the PSTs' education courses in science and English, observed their interactions online, and interviewed six PSTs in each of these two cohorts each semester. Data analysis for this study included analysis of interview transcripts, archived communications online, and observation field notes.

RESULTS

Secondary Science Education

The first semester, the class met in a traditional classroom with student chairs in rows facing a teacher's desk at the front. The second semester was in a science lab where students sat in rows facing the instructor. Neither arrangement facilitated communication and collaboration among the PSTs. The Journal tool allowed users to post reflections and share them with others in the Journal community. The science education professor who led the course in the first two semesters assigned a series of Journal entry topics and teams with whom PSTs were to share their entries. Journaling counted only 5% of the total grade. In the third semester, PSTs were able to return to the renovated education building. Smaller tables in the room were rearranged for multiple groupings, providing more opportunity for communication. Much of the structure of the course was relaxed but use of the Journal was dropped. Over time, the face-to-face interactions of this group evidenced several markers of community—shared experiences, shared responsibilities within class, and a shared identity as science

education majors. While there was a noticeable absence of an entrance ritual for the group, the PSTs created an exit ritual in the form of a carry-in dinner hosted by one of the PSTs. Several developed long-term meaningful relationships. Yet online participation via the Journal was limited to the assigned tasks. Most appeared to be relieved when the Journal assignments were dropped.

Secondary English Education

From the first, this syllabus of this sequence of classes espoused a model of learning through practice and from one another. In the first semester, the class met in a traditional classroom where chairs were most often arranged in rows facing the front. Occasionally students met in smaller “reader-response” groups, but there was generally little time for student-student interaction. In the second semester, the instructor asked the students to arrange the chairs in one large circle for each class meeting. CourseInfo was adopted and the discussion board became a regular means of communication among students. PSTs posted over 500 messages, discussing the books they were reading, giving feedback on their peers’ microteaching lessons in class, and discussing other topics that emerged in class and in their field experiences. In the third semester, the class moved back to a more teacher-centric physical layout in the renovated education building, with desks facing the front, to take advantage of the new presentation technologies. Use of the discussion forum was limited to PSTs reporing on their field experiences. Through their face-to-face interactions, members of this cohort showed signs of developing community through shared experiences in this class and other English classes they had in common. They developed a shared identity as English education majors and reorganized a local chapter of NCTE (MUCTE). There was a noticeable absence of any entrance ritual in the first semester, but the instructor in the second semester created both an entrance ritual—through in class and online introductions—and an exit ritual in the form of a social gathering at the end of the semester. Connections made then carried into the third semester, but there was no exit ritual at the end of their three semesters together. Overall, participation online waxed and waned over the three semesters as greater or lesser importance was given to the online dialogue as integral to class communication.

DISCUSSION

Both groups evidenced the formation of a community of practice through their co-present interactions. Signs of community in the science education cohort did not emerge until the third semester, when the classroom and pedagogical structure were more relaxed and the use of the Journal tool was abandoned. The Journal tool did not serve them well as a community tool. Signs of community in the English education cohort emerged and peaked in the second semester. Changes physical and pedagogical structure and the addition of the CourseInfo discussion board helped to build stronger community ties. Participation in class and online increased dramatically. Despite the move to a modern, spacious, and technologically-enhanced classroom in the third semester, online participation appeared to diminish, ending in silence rather than a flurry of good-byes and a closing celebration. Clearly, the physical and pedagogical contexts of the classes mattered as much as the tools. At the same time, the way the tools were used—the importance they were given in the curriculum and the structure of the expected communications — had an effect on how PSTs used them to develop online communities of practice.

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