

USING CASENEX IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Traditional teacher education programs are turning to non-traditional approaches to preservice teacher preparation as they struggle to keep up with increasing demand for teachers. Many of these approaches include web-based or other distance-based programs. One significant challenge continues, however: providing realistic situations within non-traditional teacher preparation courses that ground students' theoretical learning. The purpose of our pilot project was to investigate student receptiveness to a multimedia-based, case-method alternative for developing teachers' abilities to connect theoretical knowledge learned in classrooms with real-life teaching and learning scenarios each is likely to encounter in schools. Student evaluations suggest the cases helped them tie theoretical knowledge to practical situations and provided a realistic foundation from which to begin exploration of deeper issues and possible actions as emerging educators.

Introduction

The Department of Public Instruction in our state expects to hire an average of 11,000 new teachers each year this decade. National attrition rates suggest as many as half of new teachers exit the profession within five years of entering it. Combined with increases in the number of school-aged children and the anticipated retirement of nearly one-third the current K-12 teaching force by 2010, an alarming trend toward a significant teacher shortage is evident. The traditional teacher education programs throughout the state's universities are working diligently to keep up; still, they produce only one-third the current demand.

Our college of education has participated an innovative partnership intended to meet the increased demand in this, as well as other, high-need areas throughout the state. The Appalachian Learning Alliance is a partnership between the university and ten regional community colleges. The Alliance is designed to provide baccalaureate and graduate degree programs to students through a combination of technology and face-to-face instruction on the community college campuses. The Appalachian Learning Alliance considers local and regional education needs and work force development requirements when considering which programs to offer through the partnership. The Alliance is also sensitive to the projected 50,000-student enrollment increase across the state over the next several years. Through the Alliance, our college of education offers as many as 90 courses each year at multiple partner sites, serving nearly 1,000 students and generating more than 85% of off-campus enrollments each year.

Though innovative and clearly student-oriented, there exist significant logical and administrative challenges when considering non-traditional teacher preparation programs. Questions of quality, resources, and consistency are omnipresent. Through careful

consideration and coordination, most issues are addressed. Off-campus courses, for example, are taught by regular faculty – either face-to-face on the community college campus or through technology-based instruction (e.g., videoconference- and/or web-based). Also, all students must pass through the same admissions processes, follow the same semester-based schedule, and adhere to the same criteria for success as those who attend traditional classes.

However, in the area of teacher education, one particular challenge still exists: providing realistic situations within non-traditional teacher preparation courses that ground students' theoretical learning.

Conceptual Framework

Our college of education is guided by a conceptual framework that reflects input from all faculty. The conceptual framework makes explicit three assumptions that guide instructional activities throughout the college. These assumptions are:

- Knowledge is socially constructed;
- Communities of Practice provide the context for learning; and
- Knowledge is the tool that guides teaching.

These assumptions are reflected through in-class activities and out-of-class experiences in each of the courses in which preservice teachers enroll. Most important, the conceptual framework stimulates a bias toward experiential learning at all levels – including meaningful field experiences and realistic interactions with educational issues within the introductory-level courses. For students enrolled in our on-campus introductory teaching course, the Fifth Dimension project has provided an appropriate experience. However, for our off-campus students – and also, to a lesser extent, our summer session students – finding a comparable experience has been challenging.

Casenex

In the summer of 2002, the authors initiated a pilot project using web-based, case-based instruction website to support those students in our off-campus and summer programs. The purpose of our pilot project was to investigate student receptiveness to a multimedia-based, case-method alternative for developing teachers' abilities to connect theoretical knowledge learned in classrooms with real-life teaching and learning scenarios each is likely to encounter in schools.

Casenex is a WWW-based learning environment where teachers use the latest technologies to form communities of professionals who encounter "slice-of-life" cases, hone their problem solving skills, and use a variety of technologies within an educational environment. *Casenex* is comprised of cases, readings, syllabus, tutorials, discussions, teaching notes, and other instructor resources. The teaching cases are divided according to elementary, middle, or high school situations and are available from the website. Each case addresses some combination of curricular issues, and many have multiple themes (e.g., technology and parent interaction; special needs and writing; etc.). A syllabus is provided as a guide for students and instructors. The syllabus includes a recommended

route through the cases, as well as suggested readings. Tutorials designed to help participants analyze cases, navigate the *Casenex* website, use discussion groups, understand the Web, use multimedia production tools, and participate in videoconferences are provided within the help section.

Teamwork is an integral component of the *Casenex* experience. Discussion groups and an interactive calendar for scheduling videoconferences are provided to support connections between teams of students across participating universities and school districts. In addition, resources such as teaching notes, session tips, websites of interest, and notes from the Virtual Librarian are all available to support instruction and interaction.

Methodology

The authors constructed a series of instructional modules consisting of face-to-face instruction and web-based case analysis. Cases were selected based on relevance to course goals, realism (including quality of classroom footage), and the quality of the issues represented. Students in both an introductory teaching course as well as an advanced curriculum and a graduate technology course engaged in case analysis, discourse, and cross-campus dialog about the issues and perspectives raised in the cases. Students were given a heuristic for analyzing cases (Bronack & McNergney, 1998) and were asked to work in teams. Students were also encouraged to seek additional knowledge that might inform their decisions, should they find themselves in a situation similar to the one(s) depicted in the cases. At the end of the session, students were asked to react to their experience.

Student reactions

Students who value what they are learning are more likely to remain engaged in the learning activity and, as a result, gain a greater level of understanding of the material under study. Measuring the level of satisfaction students experience after completion of the course provides useful information about the overall effectiveness of the learning environment. To gather this information, all participants were issued an end-of-course evaluation, through which they reported their satisfaction with the *Casenex* experience. The students in both the introductory as well as the advanced courses responded very positively. Students reported that the cases helped them tie theoretical knowledge to practical situations. Students generally provided high recommendations for the case-method instructional model – a model that fits well within our college’s conceptual framework. Finally, both the students and the professors suggest that the *Casenex* experience provided a realistic foundation from which to begin exploration of deeper issues and possible actions.

Conclusion

Although the research conducted in this study focused solely on preservice teachers it is important for teacher educators to examine the effect of Web-based, case-based learning environments on all teachers. For example, some have reported that, in an online collaborative environment that integrated inservice, preservice, and graduate teachers, only the preservice teachers showed significant changes in their attitudes and beliefs

toward a particular form of technology integration (Norton & Sprague, 1996). Whether this would hold true across other computer-based educational endeavors is open to question.

Introducing an environment such as *Casenex* into our teacher preparation program serves multiple purposes. First, it provides an environment where teachers are able to interact with each other in ways previously unavailable. Additionally, teachers who participate in the environment are gaining first-hand experience with an innovation (Web-based instruction) that currently is impacting the field of instruction on several fronts. By considering the concerns of those teachers participating in this innovation, we have gained an early perspective on the impact immersion in such environments has on developing teachers.

Still, questions remain. For example, will the same positive results emerge when *Casenex* is implemented across instructors and even across locations? The particular meaning of any given innovation is rarely operationalized in the same way at different locations and within different classrooms. In fact, some research suggests that, where widespread diffusion of an innovation has been attempted, no two locations use the exact same form of the innovation, nor is there any real agreement on identifying the same operational definitions for what the innovation actually means (Hall & Loucks, 1978). It seems clear that, ultimately, it is the ability to support consistent adjustments in how instructors view the role of an environment such as *Casenex* in the teacher preparation process that will be the harbinger of successful integration.

Finally, it is important not to lose sight of the ultimate measure of success for teacher preparation programs – that is, their graduates' overall ability to support student learning. To understand fully the impact of a Web-based, case-based learning environment on developing teachers, longitudinal studies that follow current participants into their future classrooms is required. Such research would provide valuable insight into the scope and intensity of experiences in environments such as *Casenex* on developing teachers and on the reasonability of including such options in support of innovative approaches to addressing our teacher shortage problem.

References

Bronack, S.C. & McNergney, R. F. (1998).

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