Developing New Literacies through Blended Learning: Challenges and Lessons Learned in Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the implementation and impact of two blended models of teacher professional learning that promote innovative classroom practice and improved literacy and numeracy in six school districts in Ontario, Canada. The Advanced Broadband Enabled Learning Program (ABEL), situated at York University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, transforms how teachers learn and teach through a strategic blend of face-to-face interaction, technological tools and resources, online interaction and support. Learning Connections (LC), its sister project, uses the same model to improve literacy and numeracy in school districts. Research into the impact of both programs reveals increased student engagement and achievement, enhanced teacher efficacy, and improved results in literacy and numeracy. This report presents the findings from two participant surveys conducted in one large suburban board just north of Toronto, and one large rural board in Northern Ontario, and demonstrates how the working definition of literacy that teachers use in the classroom is being transformed by their use of technology in the classroom.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Digital Literacy, Elementary and Secondary Divisions, Literacy and Numeracy, Professional Learning, School Improvement

DEVELOPING NEW LITERACIES THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING

When in April 2004 the International Reading Association in the United States published Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading, the editors included a chapter that made a cogent argument for adopting a new literacies perspective. They argued that such a perspective would recognize the wide range of skills needed to use and adapt to changing information and communication technologies and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and professional lives. In that chapter Leu, Kinzer, Coiro and Cammack (2004) argue that the emergence of technology in the twenty-first century has been so rapid and
so continuous and the skills needed to employ this technology have become so complex that literacy had become a multimodal concept and necessitated a change in teacher roles within the new literacy classrooms of the twenty-first century. They assert that three forms of rapid change have taken place in our understanding of literacy: the transformation of the concept because of technological change; the envisioning of new literacy potentials within new technologies; and the use of efficient modes of communication that rapidly spread new literacies. They defined a new role for the teacher in the classroom as a developer of critical literacies necessary to ensure thoughtful use of the new technologies and ensure that students were prepared to live and work successfully in a new digital world.

This new role is particularly challenging for teachers and for professional programs responsible for their learning because teachers live and work in a society in transition, a society that still values the traditional literacies of the twentieth century in education while embracing the new literacies of the twenty-first in private and in public life. The problem confronting every professional learning program for teachers is how to ensure that student achievement levels in reading and writing are improved on standardized tests while at the same time recognizing that to be literate in the twenty-first century means to be skilled in the new literacies as well. This problem is far more complex than we might assume. Research (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005) indicates that change for teachers involves both the social reconstruction of their role as teachers and reflection upon what classroom instruction looks like from this new perspective. If we expect teachers to develop expertise to ensure that students master all of the multiple literacies needed in the twenty-first century, then we need to recognize how challenging that process will be and use a model of teacher in-service that is both appropriate and effective.

In this decade we have witnessed a powerful convergence of research and public policy that promises to transform teacher practice, make an expanded concept of digital literacy central to teaching and learning, and prepare students to learn, communicate and live successfully in a multi-modal digital world. With the introduction of technology into the work world, the home, and the classroom over the past twenty years our conception of literacy and literacy instruction has broadened fundamentally (Leu, Kinser, Coiro, & Carmmack, 2004). Prensky (2005) in the United States has made compelling arguments to educators to recognize and build upon the transformative influence that technology is having on learning in society and researchers from around the world are currently examining how young people use technology and experience the new literacies (Thomas, 2011). Governments in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada have created or are creating comprehensive policy documents on the digital economy, participation in a digital society, and the infrastructure and educational needs to be successful in a digital world. Research institutes such as the Metiri Group in the United States (Lemke, Coughlan, Thadani, & Martin, 2002) and FutureLab (Hague & Williamson, 2009) in the United Kingdom have outlined the critical literacy skills that students need to be successful in a technological world, provided pedagogical frameworks for teachers, and developed rubrics for evaluating student success. Societies such as the International Reading Association (Leu et al., 2004) have called on educators to recognize the critical literacies essential for effective information use. Meanwhile, academics have explored the positive impact of ubiquitous computing on teacher attitude, teacher belief, and teacher practice, defined the ways in which teachers in this environment are creating new forms of knowledge, and describe how students are expressing their learning using digital tools (Swan, Van’t Hooft, Kratcoski, & Schenker, 2007). In addition, influential change advocates, such as Fullan (2007) in Canada and Elmore (2004) in the United States have rejected traditional forms of staff development and called for a more efficient and effective model of professional learning that promotes innovative classroom practice, engages students in authentic learning,
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