Chapter 15

Capturing Educator Voices: Graduate Students Tackle Twenty-First Century Literacy Challenges in an Online Environment

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ABSTRACT

According to Albert Einstein, “It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.” This quote illustrates my online teaching philosophy as I work to mentor graduate-level educators, deepening their knowledge of how to best facilitate their students’ abilities to tackle twenty-first century literacy demands. Through designing and teaching online courses for a fully online Reading Specialist M.Ed. program as well as for students pursuing an M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education or a Reading Endorsement, I have evolved as an online educator committed to inspire student success. This chapter will present the reader with strategies to create an online learning environment where students are provided with authentic opportunities to apply research-based approaches and modes of developing their pupils’ literacy, communication, and critical thinking skills through innovative means.

INTRODUCTION

Through designing and teaching online courses for a fully online Reading Specialist M.Ed. program as well as for students pursuing a Reading Endorsement or M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education, this chapter will detail successful strategies of an online educator. It is important to offer a range of opportunities for learners to discuss, evaluate, and synthesize information and to “think creatively about your content” (Christopher, 2015, p. 168). This chapter will explore faculty-to-student and student-to-student interaction in a fully online program—including discussion boards, announcements, email, individual/group work, and feedback on assignments—in order to create a framework to facilitate effective online learning experiences. An interactive instructional style combined with meaningful assessment practices will allow faculty to better prepare students for the demands of twenty-first century teaching.

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The Master of Education in Reading Specialist Education program provides a comprehensive study of the teaching of reading and writing to students throughout the grade levels. It is geared to address the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards that emphasize literacy skills across content areas. The program is aligned with the International Literacy Association Standards among other professional organizations. Coursework is designed to develop Reading Specialists who possess a deep understanding of research-based practices for improving literacy skills and serve the literacy skills needs of a broad spectrum of constituencies. The program supports efforts to increase the literacy skills of the area’s labor force. Kentner (2015) states that “maybe it’s time we rethink the image of our students reading into something that better fits the world they live in” (p. 640). These tenets guide my work with these educators as I design learning experiences throughout the fully online Reading Specialist M.Ed program.

The program consists of 11 online courses totaling 34 semester hours in a cohort format. I have designed five of these courses, including the three Foundation courses (Understanding Readers and the Reading Process, Linking Literacy Assessment to Instruction, and Reading Instruction in the Content Areas) as well as two specialized courses (Diagnosis and Correction of Reading Difficulties and the Capstone Project). Assignments are varied in order to ensure that students are immersed in a range of meaningful learning opportunities. These include the following: an emergent literacy case study, Diverse Literature Research Project, Response-to-Intervention paper based upon a professional journal article and students’ own experiences with the process, a literacy assessment project, content-area literature presentation, professional journal presentation, comprehensive case study of a struggling reader, and a professional video update of an action research project. Students are also encouraged to participate in the university-sponsored Student Scholar Symposium or submit work to a professional journal and/or conference presentation.

A common thread throughout all of the coursework is the ability to impact assessment and instructional practices in the classroom as well as throughout the school. Connecting expanding definitions of literacy in the broad context of students’ lives with literacy instruction in our schools may require that teachers re-evaluate and transform their own understandings about literacy and their approaches to instruction (Albers, Vasquez, & Harste, 2008; Cowan & Albers, 2006; Spitler, 2009). Therefore, as teacher educators, it also becomes our responsibility to design learning experiences that support this ongoing transformation of teacher literacy identity (Spitler, 2009).

Overview of Strategies for Applying Theory to Practice

This section will discuss a framework to create an engaging online learning environment where students are provided with meaningful opportunities to practice the application of research-based approaches and modes of developing their pupils’ literacy, communication, and critical thinking skills. Discussion Boards play an integral role in creating a sense of community in the online classroom. This is accomplished through the design of creative and thoughtful student self-introductions and meaningful responses to the text and additional research articles/videos/resources. Opportunities for students to discuss current issues in the field are significant.

Strategies employed in my courses include Discussion Boards involving simulations of close reading strategies utilizing narrative and expository text; design and implementation of content-area literacy motivation surveys; and dialogue on approaches for helping students become engaged, authentic readers and writers in the age of Common Core Standards, among other means. My goal is to create a forum which encourages active reflection and analysis—through a diverse literature research project, presentations on