Chapter 6

Authentic Inquiry With Undergraduate Preservice Teachers in Synchronous Interactive Video Conferencing Courses

Marla K. Robertson
Utah State University, USA

Amy Piotrowski
Utah State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports how two teacher educators at a land-grant public university in the Intermountain West region of the United States used video conferencing and project-based learning to engage preservice teachers taking classes over interactive video conferencing. The preservice teachers in these courses had to choose a topic related to teaching writing they wanted to learn more about, research this topic, and then create a website with pieces written in multiple genres that shared what they learned from their research. Preservice teachers then shared their websites with their classmates. Data analysis suggests that preservice teachers found opportunities to engage with others on video conferencing in both whole class and small group settings to be beneficial. The authors share ways that instructors in all disciplines can incorporate project-based learning and video conferencing in their courses.

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INTRODUCTION

A major part of the mission of faculty at land grant universities is to provide access, to make courses and degree programs available to students across geographical distances. One of the primary ways the authors accomplish this is by offering synchronous courses that are broadcast via an interactive video conferencing system (IVC). Many courses are offered in the evening, providing access to students who work during the day or who are place-bound. This IVC system allows the instructor to interact with the students and for the students to hear and see each other, ask questions and participate in whole-class discussions, as well as interact with each other through small-group video conferencing. This unique teaching context provides challenges and opportunities for choosing tools and resources that are effective in distance courses. While IVC courses provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to learn from their peers across the state, it can be a struggle to engage preservice teachers in course activities and to model effective teaching methods. How can teacher educators use distance education technologies, such as IVC, to prepare preservice teachers for the education profession? One way the authors have engaged preservice teachers in learning about effective methods of teaching writing is to have preservice teachers create a multigenre digital inquiry project (MDIP) on a topic related to the teaching of writing.

Statement of the Problem

There are several particular challenges in teaching in synchronous distance courses for teacher educators. One challenge is related to a major purpose of teacher education methods courses: modeling for students methods and practices that can be incorporated into a face-to-face K-12 classroom. Some of those methods and practices include teacher-student, partner, and small group interactions. These types of interactions can be prohibitive in a synchronous distance course where students are not in the same room and the teacher is not in the same room as some of the students. Another challenge for teacher educators in an IVC environment is that students are located in a variety of locations. There may be multiple students in some locations, and some locations may only have one student. The authors typically have five to eight locations in a course but have had as many as 16 locations in one class with a combination of single students and multiple students in each location. These classes can have as few as ten to as many as 35 students spread across these locations. In these situations, the biggest challenge can be for students who are alone at their site and do not have any other students (or the instructor) to talk to in person.

In a typical synchronous distance course, most conversations about the weekly readings or on other content are done whole class with the instructor lecturing or
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