Chapter 8
Considerations for Effective Collaborative Practice: A Reflection on the use of Case Studies in On–Line Teacher Education Learning Spaces

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ABSTRACT
This chapter provides a retrospective review of the utility and effectiveness of case study analyses to engage and support students in online collaborative learning within teacher education coursework. Specifically, the interrelationship among factors related to the instructor, the student, the tasks, and the on-line learning environments are examined resulting in suggestions for designing, implementing, and researching case study learning activities that foster and enhance collaboration in online teacher education coursework.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY
The authors take a retrospective look at an online collaborative project carried out in a Canadian Faculty of Education over two academic years, 2003-2004. The initial collaboration (Winter & McGhie-Richmond, 2005) represented the first online collaborative work for the two faculty members and the students enrolled in two graduate special education courses. In each year, a course in collaborative consultation comprised of 20 experienced elementary and secondary school practitioners was involved. They are referred to as ‘experts’. The second group was a cohort of 20 pre-service student teachers from the Master of Teaching (MT) programme in the faculty undertaking their special education module. Their in-school experience was confined to the practice teaching sessions required by their programme. This group is referred to as ‘novices’. In each of the two years, the instructors established small...
groups (4-5 participants per group) combining experts and novices from the two courses to undertake special education case studies. It is important to note that both courses consisted of 12 face to face weekly evening classes of 3 hours for a total of 36 hours. The collaborative case studies constituted the assignment for each course. The facility of working online was in addition to the regular scheduled classes. The instructors had maximum autonomy and flexibility in terms of coursework and assignments providing these met the course objectives and were consistent with the university’s quality assurance requirements.

The project revolved around two major questions articulated by Ethell and McMeniman (2000, p. 87). The first, “How best to prepare individuals for the complex and multifaceted profession of teaching…”; the second, “How can the knowledge of expert classroom teachers be made available to student or novice teachers if such knowledge is, to a large degree, unarticulated, tacit in nature, and grounded in experience?” (p. 88). Research suggests that expert teachers’ knowledge is superior to that of novice teachers in both content and pedagogy (Livingston & Borko, 1989; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1992; Sternberg & Horvath, 1995). It is essential that this knowledge, often referred to as ‘practical knowledge’ (Carter, 1990; Eraut, 1994; Fenstermacher, 1994), be passed on to new teachers to avoid the situation where, “the wheels of teaching have to be reinvented by each new generation” (Brown & McIntyre, 1995, p. 14). This is particularly relevant in this project where accessing the expertise of the experienced practitioners in the collaborative online context was key. In the context of special education courses and the current climate of inclusion this would seem to have particular resonance. Closing the gap between theory and practice remains one of the greatest challenges in teacher education.

The instructors believed that having the two cohorts collaborate on special education case studies could provide opportunities for:

- pre-service student teachers to access the ‘practical knowledge’ of the more experienced and more expert practitioners;
- the experienced cohort to practice and to develop their collaborative consultation skills;
- a collaborative, shared experience centered on a ‘real world’ classroom situation and designed to stimulate and develop higher-level critical and analytical thinking skills.

The intention was that the case studies should challenge the students to interact with and apply theory to everyday classroom situations. The rationale was based on the assumption that the most meaningful and long lasting learning takes place when the learners are involved actively in the learning process. The problem solving involved in collaboration requires active participation, with individual preparation and contributions towards the solutions. In case studies, there are many potential solutions that depend on the work of group members and on the collective choices made regarding how to proceed in resolving the case.

Both instructors were aware that web-based learning had increased in recent years and is regarded generally as an effective teaching and learning medium (Gerhing, 1994; Golberg, 1997; McCollum, 1997). Sustained asynchronous communication allows learners, distant in both time and place, to collaborate effectively in the social construction of knowledge (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995; Hiltz & Wellman, 1997). Web Knowledge Forum (WebKF), a web based collaborative knowledge building application and system, facilitated the online collaborative work (WebKF, 2000). Adding a web based component required considerable instructor collaboration to ensure that the aims of the respective courses were met and that the case studies presented meaningful learning experiences for the distinctly different student cohorts. The cases were selected from Hutchinson (1999, p. xiv), who provides samples taken from Canadian
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