Chapter XI

Online Classroom Simulation:
Using a Virtual Classroom to Support Pre-Service Teacher Thinking

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Abstract

Research consistently shows that traditional preservice teacher preparation programs are not adequately preparing beginning teachers for the reality of classrooms. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the development and implementation of an online classroom simulation designed to develop pre-service teachers’ decision-making skills within the context of young children’s literacy education. The classroom simulation allows the user to take on the role of the teacher of a virtual kindergarten classroom (ages
five to six years). During the simulation the user makes decisions about the organisation of teaching and learning experiences, classroom management, and responses to individual students. The user is able to monitor and track the progress of three targeted students throughout the course of the simulation. An embedded tool, what we refer to as the “thinking space,” has been developed to enable the user to plan and justify new decisions and reflect upon the consequences of previous decisions.

Introduction

For several decades researchers have consistently acknowledged that traditional pre-service teacher preparation programs do not adequately prepare beginning teachers for the reality of modern classrooms (Cusworth & Whiting, 1994; Blackwell, Futrell, & Imig, 2003; Reynolds, 1995). Various small-scale innovations have been suggested, however, one key factor that emerges from the research is the quality of classroom experience during practicum (Ramsay, 2000). Often this factor is more closely controlled in small-scale innovations where supervising teachers and classroom experiences are more carefully selected. The challenge for teacher educators is to reproduce such a quality experience on a larger scale.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. We describe the development of an online classroom simulation and how we think this can add value to the practicum experience; the specific design features of the prototype version of the software; and our research into our initial trial of this software with pre-service teachers.

The classroom simulation prototype allows the user to take on the role of the teacher of a virtual kindergarten classroom. During the simulation the user is required to make decisions about organising the lesson, classroom management, and responses to individual students. The user is able to monitor and track the progress of three targeted students throughout the course of the simulation. An embedded tool, referred to as the “thinking space,” has been used to encourage the user to plan and justify new decisions, reflect upon the consequences of previous decisions and above all, have the opportunity to “think like a teacher.”