Chapter 6
Creating Virtual Field Trips to Support Student-Centered Learning

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ABSTRACT

Using a case study approach, elementary preservice teachers created Virtual Field Trips (VFTs) based around the Common Core Standards, state content standards, and cross-disciplinary content integration. The following semester, these virtual field trips were used in their student teaching placements. The researchers interviewed the preservice teachers to determine the benefits and challenges of creating VFTs and using VFTs in the elementary classroom. The data revealed that preservice teachers perceived the following benefits of virtual field trips: VFTs emphasized multiple perspectives on a topic, extended and integrated learning, allowed students to virtually experience places they may not normally have an opportunity to visit, and are more cost-effective than traditional field trips. Challenges include: Limited technology skills (of preservice teachers) and availability of technology while implementing VFTs; schools and classrooms with limited technology decreases the ability for all students to take the virtual field trip; and user-friendliness for younger students. The concept of global awareness was emphasized as preservice teachers presented virtual field trips internationally to other professionals and schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Elementary preservice teachers must leave universities prepared to use best practices in literacy instruction that are appropriate for 21st century learners. Much attention has been brought to light about combining traditional literacy practices with new literacies to enrich learning. National literacy organizations, such as the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE), suggest that future/current literacy teachers must be able to incorporate multiple forms of literacy that include technological literacy (IRA, 2009; NCTE, 2008). Davies (2011) defined technological literacy as “the ability to effectively use technology to accomplish required learning tasks” (p. 47). Teachers should facilitate students’ understanding as they help scaffold them to learn ways to accomplish learning objectives while making intelligent decisions about the use of technology.

In this chapter, the authors first situate best practices in elementary literacy education within a new literacies framework. Literature involving the social constructivist theory of learning and global citizenship is also discussed. The researchers then describe the themes that emerged as elementary preservice teachers designed and implemented cross-curricular, digital “field trips” (virtual field trips) for a targeted age group of learners. The authors examine the process of creating and implementing virtual field trips (VFTs) from the perceptions of the preservice teachers. In addition, the authors suggest implications for integrating cross-curricular, new literacies projects, such as the virtual field trip project, into teacher education programs.

Context for Best Practices in Elementary Literacy Instruction

The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) recommended that Scientifically Based Reading Research (SBRR) should be used to frame literacy instruction, and focused on addressing phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and reading fluency in an explicit manner. However, beyond simply developing an expertise in these key literacy skills, research-based best practices suggest that exemplary literacy educators must go beyond isolated, skills-based instruction and also recognize and build upon the various forms of literacy children regularly use at home and in their communities (Gee, 2004; Heath, 1983). In addition, best practices suggest that literacy educators create literacy experiences that are relevant and meaningful to children’s lives (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007) and include multiple literacies (Larson, 2006). A multiple literacies framework recognizes literacy as complex and contextually situated, as opposed to a set of neutral, linear skills (Larson, 2006). In addition, new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) also go beyond the traditional view of literacy as simple encoding/decoding/comprehending and recognize that as our society changes, so must the ways we define literacy (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). New literacies recognize literacy as multimodal, global, consisting of new social practices, and constantly changing as various forms of technology change in society (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2013). Labbo (2007) offered the following definition of new literacies:

New literacies include traditional skills and strategies but also include other abilities, such as being able to compose and publish with word-processing and desktop-publishing programs, to exchange messages using email and Web postings, to assemble knowledge from various multimedia resources, to understand visual components of literacy, to be able to read critically, to access hypertext and linked information on the Internet, and to express meaning in multimedia forms. (p. 231)

Jaeger (2011) referred to these multiple forms of literacy as being transliterate and offers the following definition for transliteracy, “the ability to read, listen to, view, understand, synthesize,