Chapter 15

Using the Webinar Experience to Increase Teacher Presence within an Online Pre-Service Literacy Course

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ABSTRACT

Literacy methods classes for elementary teachers are known for providing content where instructors typically demonstrate and model effective teaching techniques for students. With the ongoing shift towards online learning contexts in place of face-to-face courses, the challenge for the instructor in literacy teacher education is to recreate a learning environment where the teacher presence is still strong in order to facilitate the learning of teaching pedagogies. This chapter describes one instructor’s pilot study using real-time synchronous learning experiences with 59 undergraduate pre-service teachers in a literacy methods course for elementary (PK-6th grade) teacher candidates. Drawing on the Community of Inquiry framework, the instructor discusses the structure of the Webinar experiences (facilitated using Blackboard Collaborate™) as well as preliminary themes that emerged from content analysis of the Webinars themselves. The author also shares preliminary findings of the analysis of the post-Webinar written reflections generated by the students. Findings suggest that the experience was overall positive and beneficial to students’ learning and that the Webinars allowed for a strong teacher presence in the course. Limitations include low participation in the actual Webinar with most students opting to view the recording.

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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, teacher education courses are moving into online teaching contexts. A growing set of online course offerings and an increase in overall participation in online courses provide both challenges and opportunities for literacy teacher educators to examine ways to teach online courses that have been traditionally taught on-campus. Within teacher education, literacy methods courses offer a chance to share knowledge and information with students, often through demonstration and practice. Within an online-only course, the opportunity to do live demonstrations and to model effective instruction can be accomplished through the live-webinar experience. Desktop videoconferencing tools potentially provide an efficient way for an instructor to do what is often difficult in online-only settings, or, teach and demonstrate literacy methods across distance.

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, I wish to describe the implementation of an established synchronous learning tool—group video conferencing (webinars)—within an online-only undergraduate literacy methods course for elementary pre-service teachers seeking initial certification. Secondly, I offer a theoretical framework for using videoconferencing/real-time learning tools within online-only or hybrid pre-service literacy courses in teacher education programs. With increasing opportunities to courses via online-only venues (Allen & Seaman, 2010), this chapter addresses results of a specific project as well as provides a theoretical framework for its use to address concerns for literacy faculty wanting to continue the demonstration aspect of face-to-face literacy courses for pre-service teachers via online-only or hybrid courses.

This chapter’s rationale and theoretical model for using webinar-based learning is based on development of a professional identity by enculturation into a Community of Inquiry (COI) stance, as described and developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) and Garrison and Arbaugh (2007). Drawing on ideas from the Community of Inquiry (COI) Framework this chapter author suggests that the increased teacher presence in particular helps to foster a COI stance in online settings. Essentially, the three core elements that comprise a COI according to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) include the teacher presence (e.g., the design of the course and ongoing interaction between teacher and students), cognitive presence of the students, as well as the social presence (community building) of the students. Describing and analysing the role of the teacher presence will be the primary focus of this chapter; the teacher presence can be primarily characterized by the upfront design of the course, direct instruction, and facilitating discourse used the instructor (Anderson, Rourke, & Garrison, 2001; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

Additionally, in creating a framework for using webinars, I draw on Pearson and Gallagher’s model of the gradual release of responsibility (1983) to offer support for the demonstration of teaching techniques and, to some degree, the guided practice components within the videoconferencing/webinar experience. A caveat is that although the original definition of the gradual release of responsibility model by Pearson and Gallagher includes the transition from teacher-led demonstrations to guided practice to independent practice by students, the webinars themselves did not include heavy guided practice or independent practice components.

The rest of the chapter will connect both the teacher presence component of the COI framework as well as the more literacy-focused framework and modelling component of the gradual release of responsibility model with specific and concrete instances of webinar-based learning from the author’s research study.