



Authenticity, relevance, and connectedness: Graduate students' learning preferences and experiences in an online reading education course



Elizabeth A. Swaggerty^{a,*}, Amy D. Broemmel^b

^a College of Education, Department of Literacy Studies, English Education, and History Education, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858, United States

^b College of Education, Health and Human Sciences, Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996-3442, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 July 2016

Received in revised form 17 October 2016

Accepted 17 October 2016

Available online 18 October 2016

Keywords:

Online learning

Higher education

Reading education

Teacher education

Social learning theory

Teacher action research

ABSTRACT

This study examined Master's in Reading Education students' learning experiences and preferences in an online two-course sequence designed to foster social learning and the application of knowledge through teacher action research. Interviews, discussion forum posts, and end-of-year course effectiveness surveys served as data sources. When sharing course aspects that facilitated learning, students most frequently referred to (a) synchronous and asynchronous interactions and collaboration with classmates and the instructor and (b) authentic assignments that built on one another, aiding the successful completion of action research projects that were relevant to their current interests and teaching contexts. The strength in online course effectiveness was in communication and collaboration, shared feelings of membership in the online learning community, and the authenticity of assignments and course activities.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Inc.

1. Introduction

Studies comparing online and face-to-face delivery methods have found that learning is comparable in both environments (Marsh, Lammers, & Alvermann, 2012; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). As online teacher education degree programs increase (Golod, 2014), it is important to continue to investigate how to add value to online learning. One such way to add value is through course design and pedagogy that cultivates a sense of community and authentic learning. Wenger (1998) emphasized identity realization through social interactions within communities of practice. Teachers have membership in multiple communities of practice such as home, work, school, and leisure activities and learn through their participation in each. Participants in a community of practice share a passion for something they know how to do and interact regularly to improve their practice (Wenger, 1998). Interactions are equally important in online learning environments (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), and the application of social learning constructs to virtual environments has increased (e.g., Hill, Song, & West, 2009; Rovai, 2002). Rovai (2002) found that online graduate students with a stronger sense of classroom community reported higher levels of cognitive learning. Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, and Stevens (2012) found that although students in online

courses across various undergraduate and graduate degree programs preferred the use of multimedia and opportunities to interact with others, they felt disconnected with instructors, course content, and classmates.

2. Perspectives and purpose

This study is grounded in the belief that in teacher education, educators should be supported in their abilities to enact knowledge gained with diverse students in classrooms (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, & Hammerness, 2005). The focus is on tailoring specific learning goals, considering students' backgrounds and prior knowledge, and bearing in mind the contexts in which the learning will take place. Further, when teachers learn strategies and tools that they have the opportunity to enact immediately and continue to refine with a group of colleagues in a learning community, they are more able to enact new practices effectively (Cohen & Hill, 2000). In this study, participants enacted learning about literacy education gained in Master's Degree courses through capstone action research projects. Action research is formalized teacher inquiry in which educators systematically study their own classrooms and aim to improve teaching practices (Hendricks, 2009).

The current study examined graduate students' learning experiences and preferences in an online two-course sequence that was designed to foster social learning and the application of knowledge about K-8 reading education through teacher action research. The courses in this study reflected a practical perspective of educational action research, one that embraced deep engagement with classroom practice and intended to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: swaggertye@ecu.edu (E.A. Swaggerty), broemmel@utk.edu (A.D. Broemmel).

improve teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Noffke & Stevenson, 1995). This report shares students' perspectives of course aspects that aided their ability to carry out action research projects within this virtual context.

3. Context of the study

This study took place at a major university in the southeastern United States that has a rich history of teacher education, beginning as a teacher training school in 1907. At the time of data collection, its college of education boasted a clinical schools network comprised of 39 area public school systems and included both traditional and alternative pathways to initial teacher certification and 17 online graduate programs. The Master's Degree in Reading Education was a reading specialist program that resulted in advanced licensure in reading education. Originally, the program served cohorts of students in surrounding counties as a "distance education" option in which university instructors drove to local high schools and community colleges to facilitate face-to-face classes with students. Over time, the course format shifted and all courses were offered online. Some discussion forum participation was required, but students primarily worked independently on course assignments and activities. Supported by multiple online teaching and learning professional development opportunities offered by the college, instructors began to acknowledge the importance of social presence and collaboration in online teaching and learning.

The first author taught both sections of the action research sequence and, at the time of the study, was in her fourth year of teaching it. She designed assignments and learning tasks to scaffold student development of a research proposal during the first semester and a final action research paper the second semester. During the first semester, students read articles and chapters that described how to conduct teacher action research, learned about ethical considerations related to conducting action research in schools, read published action research articles, conceptualized and presented an action research proposal to departmental faculty members, and sought university IRB approval for their projects. During the second semester, students carried out the study and wrote and shared a final report and digital project. Course activities took place virtually, through an online course platform, Moodle. Six synchronous class meetings took place via Sabameeting over the course of both terms; however, students who were unable to attend the live meetings had access to the recording. Students worked in small groups for the purpose of proposal planning and practicing presentations. Small group meetings took place via Google Hangout. Proposal presentations took place via Google Hangout or were face-to-face if students chose to travel to campus. Additionally, document sharing (e.g., GoogleDocs), discussion forums, phone calls, and email were used to facilitate course activities and provide student support.

4. Methodology

An interpretive, naturalistic intrinsic case study approach (Creswell, 1998) was used to investigate the aspects of course design and facilitation that aided students' ability to carry out action research projects within the context of an online master's program. We aimed to understand students' learning experiences and preferences. The sample included eleven of thirteen graduate students enrolled in a two-course action research course sequence. All were female. Six participants were not employed as K-12 teachers at the time of the study and, thus, completed the action research project in another teacher's classroom. Five participants held teaching positions at public schools. All participants successfully completed the two-course sequence and action research project. See Fig. 1 for participant descriptions.

The primary data source was student interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted two times, mid-year and end-of-year, in order to gain insight about students' perceptions of course design and assignments that aided in their learning. Interviews were conducted

individually and each student was asked (1) What were the most valuable parts of the course, the ones that contributed most to your learning? (2) What parts of the course did you struggle with the most? Interviewees were prompted to describe, expand, and explain their responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. A graduate assistant conducted mid-year interviews to avoid conflict of interest since the first author served as the instructor for the second course in the sequence. The first author conducted the end-of-year interviews after grades were submitted. Interview questions were the same both times. The purpose of the two sets of interviews was to capture students' thinking at two points of the year in order to avoid a situation in which they recalled the most recent assignments and activities as beneficial simply because they were the easiest to remember (when interviewed in May or June, will one recall events from September as important?). Course discussion forum participation statistics and end-of-course evaluations were used to triangulate data (Yin, 2014).

Data analysis focused on understanding aspects of course design and facilitation that aided Masters in Reading Education candidates' abilities to carry out action research projects within the context of the online course. The first author engaged in a preliminary read of the interview transcripts to obtain a sense of the data set (Creswell, 2012). Inductive coding of each transcript was then conducted, resulting in nineteen tentative codes that were refined as the coding progressed (e.g., virtual meetings, discussion boards). Frequency counts were obtained for each code (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Instances were then sorted by code-type for closer analysis and consideration of the underlying meaning of each code by both authors. Codes were collapsed into broad categories, or themes, and subthemes.

Discussion forum participation and end-of-course evaluations were used to triangulate the data, seeing if these data sources supported or contradicted interview findings. End-of-course evaluations were anonymous. The response rate for the first course was 39% and the response rate for the second course was 54%.

5. Findings

Analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of two broad themes that described aspects of the course that facilitated participants' learning: (a) opportunities to interact with others about the course and (b) reference to specific independent learning assignments and tasks. Fifty-three coded instances were characterized as interactions and 24 coded instances were characterized as independent tasks (see Fig. 2). Themes and subthemes are presented in subsequent paragraphs.

5.1. Synchronous interaction and collaboration

When sharing aspects of the courses that facilitated learning, students most frequently described interactions and collaboration with others. The majority of these interactive instances were synchronous in nature, meaning they enabled participants to communicate in real-time (typically same time, but different place).

Coded within this category were virtual whole class meetings. Sabameeting was used as the virtual platform for the professor to relay information and address student questions. Participants had the capability to verbally ask questions, but most communication took place using the chat tools within the Sabameeting platform. Participants seemed to benefit from periodically coming together as a whole group to get on the same page, reflecting the notion that these students were members of a learning community in which they shared a common interest in improving teaching and learning through action research (Wenger, 1998). Wendy explained, "The Sabameetings were helpful. Just to get caught up and make sure all of us are on track at the same time" [Wendy, End-Year Interview, Lines 345–350]. Participants also valued hearing information, as opposed to most course information, which was written text, in the virtual meetings. For example,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4938827>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4938827>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)