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Educating Educational Leaders in a Blended Professional Doctorate Program

An Initial Action Research Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the first cycle of an action research study investigating the impact of new blended learning courses in a professional doctorate program, the results of which will inform future course planning and pedagogy. Specifically, core researcher-faculty members associated with the program were interested in understanding how a blended learning program impacted students' learning experiences. In our findings from this initial inquiry, we detail both constraining and enabling elements of the hybrid experiences provided to students. We also describe the revised action plan created from these findings to improve our ability to utilize the online portion of our doctoral coursework to meet our larger goals of preparing educational leaders to fight for issues of social justice in K-12 settings and beyond.

KEY WORDS:

social justice, educational leadership, action research, online instruction, hybrid pedagogy, blended instruction, education doctorate programs Online Doctorate Programs; CPED, Impact of Educational Doctorate; Synchronous Online Delivery

INTRODUCTION

The California State University East Bay's (CSUEB) Educational Leadership for Social Justice (ELSJ) doctoral program has recently introduced program changes geared toward providing a more supportive, yet rigorous research experience. These include carefully scaffolding research courses to support work leading up to the dissertation, making academic writing an explicit (yet problematized) part of the research curriculum, and transitioning to a blended format that combines online and face-to-face class sessions. We focus on the latter, describing an action research study undertaken by three of the program's principal faculty members. The study was designed to investigate the impact of new blended learning courses in the professional doctorate program. Specifically, researcher-faculty members were interested in how a blended learning program impacted students' learning experiences. The knowledge generated from the study informs both local practices and program structures, provides transferrable information for other professional doctorate programs seeking to adopt blended learning formats, and contributes to the slim, but growing, focus on high-quality doctoral education specifically for practitioners.

In a rapidly diversifying educational context in the US (Valdés & Castellón, 2011) that includes an expansion of well-documented historical inequalities in wealth and power (Bale & Knopp, 2012), school leadership that prioritizes social justice goals is paramount (Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012). Yet, issues of social justice tend to be marginalized in educational leadership programs (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009), particularly as the current neoliberal educational reforms have turned attention toward accountability and finance (Lipman, 2011). Neoliberalism is a globally reigning ideological doctrine that asserts that societal wealth and advancement stems from individual entrepreneurialism, privatization of social services, and markets free from government regulation (Hursh, 2011). When applied to education as *corporate education reforms* (Ravitch, 2011), this market-driven logic has resulted in increasing testing, systematic starving of public school funding, and punitive treatment of high-poverty schools mainly serving students of color. Against this contextual backdrop, preparing K-12 educational leaders with strong social justice orientations and the ability to impact educational change is critically important.

The CSUEB Educational Leadership for Social Justice (ELSJ) EdD program has focused on providing this type of critical prepara-

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tion for its students for the past several years in California. However, with the intensification of schooling (Apple, 2004) that has accompanied the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies into US educational systems school leaders' professional lives have become more and more complex. Accordingly, our students have communicated in multiple forums that they need a program that fits with their demanding schedules. Like many other institutions offering doctoral degrees to school leaders who are employed full time while simultaneously completing a doctoral degree, increasing access for students and improving scheduling flexibility in the ELSJ doctoral program has meant a foray into online learning opportunities (Bell & Federman, 2013). Specifically, we adopted a blended format (Dawson et al, 2011). In this type of program, online learning opportunities are offered in combination with face-to-face classes. In the ELSJ blended learning initiative, faculty members are required to offer approximately a third of their class sessions in either synchronous or asynchronous format.

Yet as the three of us—educational leadership faculty with varying K-12 career paths and academic teaching experience who were relatively new to hybrid doctoral instruction—prepared to teach three introductory summer courses in a blended format to a new cohort of students, questions arose for us that were concerned with praxis. First, we wondered how the blended format would affect students' learning experiences. Would students find the online, mainly asynchronous learning in the online classes as effective and engaging as face-to-face time? As a second consideration, we recognized that while were experts in our educational areas, we were novices to teaching through technology. While we knew how to use the technological tools at our disposal, how could we ensure that we were enacting our theoretical ideals of social constructivist learning and critical pedagogy in our online classes?

In the sections that follow, we present theoretical perspectives that inform our study, review related empirical literature, and provide an overview of the design of our inquiry. We then explore the concerns posed above through an initial cycle of action research, presenting an analysis of a qualitative student questionnaire, student communication over one quarter, and our own reflective narratives. Finally, we discuss the action plan created from the insights drawn from this first cycle of inquiry.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

Two main perspectives ground the pedagogical and curricular vision of the ELSJ program. Broadly, as noted above, we adopt a view of education based on the work of multiple critically oriented theorists and educators who examine the factors and conditions that contribute to historic and current inequalities and power differentials in schools and larger society (e.g., Bourdieu, 1973; Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995/2006; Weiler, 2001). Having worked in schools in the larger Bay Area, which tend to serve large proportions of marginalized student groups, leaders who enter the ELSJ program are normally aware of the massive inequalities that exist in our educational systems and larger society (Ladson-Billings, 2006). However, much work must be done with our students regarding less visible factors that may, albeit unintentionally, support schools' reproduction of societal power imbalances (Bourdieu, 1973)—such as recognizing and interrupting the patterns of deficit thinking toward those marginalized students and understanding the larger impact of valuing a technical view of leadership rather than a moral one (Theoharis, 2007). Raising awareness of and problematizing these often deeply invisible ways of thinking about education and leadership is very difficult, as it involves changing deep-set beliefs.

Also informing the work of the program is a theory of adult learning rooted in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In a sociocultural view of learning, learning is an inherently social activity; it occurs first as a co-construction between participants in a social setting, usually through talk, and then over time becomes internalized on the individual level (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is also a mediated activity that occurs in the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). As students construct understanding, a teacher or peer mediates learning through conversation and other tools, moving the student to more complex levels of understanding and/or skill. Finally, learning is an apprenticeship that occurs within a particular community of practice. Over time, the building of understanding and skill is visible as learners move from participating peripherally in the community to becoming a more central participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Both of the above perspectives are tightly connected to the development of relationships in a community of practice where shared understandings are constructed (Wenger, 1998) and critical, problem-posing dialogue can occur (Freire, 1970). Traditionally, such educational activities are held in person, with students and teacher able to see, hear, and be in close physical proximity with others. The physicality of these often emotionally charged interactions plays an important role in students' learning experiences. As hooks (2009) noted, "The physical experience of hearing, of listening intently, to each particular voice strengthens our capacity to learn together" (p. 139). The three of us, then, were concerned with the impact that shifting to a partially online classroom format would have on these experiences for our students. Moreover, given our personal and programmatic critical, constructivist orientations, we also wondered how this would affect our capacities as critical-scholar practitioners to enact practices and activities that allow for socially co-constructed, appropriately scaffolded learning focused on fostering socially just learners.

ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the current neoliberal context of higher education, undergirded by the same the market-driven logic discussed above, universities have sought new directions that promise an increase in student tuition dollars (Porfilio & Yu, 2006). Accordingly, programs offering full or partial online learning experiences have proliferated (Schneider & Smith, 2014). While such programs may offer universities the ability to mediate some of the damage from shrinking state appropriations and rising costs, e-learning research over the past two decades has yielded mixed results on the effectiveness of online and hybrid learning models (Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki, 2013; Russell, 1999; Zhao, Lei, Lai, & Tan, 2005). For example, two meta-analyses (Cavanaugh, 2001; Machtmes & Asher, 2000) found no significant difference between online learning (mostly distance education at that time) and face-to-face instruction, but a more recent meta-analysis conducted by Means, Toyama, Murphy, and Baki (2013) found that, on average, students in an online learning course performed modestly better than those receiving face-to-face instruction. Such mixed results may be explained by the wide variation of online education programs in terms of content, delivery method, instructor characteristics and student characteristics.

Generally, however, researchers have agreed that course design and pedagogy are the decisive factors in student experience, rather than the online or hybrid format itself. In particular, student-student interaction plays a critical role in graduate level courses (Zhao, et al, 2005). For instance, Shinsky and Stevens (2011) found that authentic, project-based activities promote active engagement, participation in groups, connections to real-world experts and frequent interaction and feedback. Another crucial component of successful online instruction is teacher-student interaction. The degree of instructor involvement is a significant distinguishing quality of effective/ineffective programs (Zhao, et al., 2005).

In terms of format, blended learning may be more fruitful for students than fully online instruction. Hilliard (2015), for example, found that more student engagement, increased academic achievement, and student retention among the benefits of blended learning. Participants of blended learning programs have the opportunity to quickly see individual progress, increase learner engagement and motivation, achieve greater access to materials and resources, and extend learning time, while experiencing the critical factor of instructor presence (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Hilliard, 2015; Nash, 2011; Zhao, 2005). Blended learning courses also provide flexibility of time and place (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), along with a more productive mixture of human and technical interaction (Zhao, et al., 2005).

However, the strategies used in face-to-face environments do not necessarily translate to fully online or blended learning (Nash, 2011). In moving instruction into a digital space, the teacher's multiple roles become different in nature, with a heavy emphasis on instructional design, including organizing, facilitating, and managing pedagogical tasks (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011). Moreover, in an online environment, student-teacher interaction is fundamentally different than the embodied experiences that occur in a face-to-face course. To shift their instructional practices to include new digital pedagogies and practices, faculty require appropriate, sustained professional development and support (Kreber & Kanuka, 2006; Merideth & Steinbronn, 2008).

Recent researchers have also raised questions regarding the capacity for online or hybrid instruction to support programs with an explicit aim of raising students' critical consciousness of educational issues such as schools' reproduction of societal inequalities (e.g., Caruthers & Friend, 2014; Schneider & Smith, 2014; Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015). Some have argued that most teachers of online or hybrid courses continue to espouse more traditional teaching methods characterized by transmission models (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011), which result in the perpetuation of teacher-student power imbalances (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013) and promote learning as an individualistic endeavor (Schneider & Smith, 2014). Others, however, suggest that critical online pedagogy is possible (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015), and such pedagogy can become "a form of political intervention entangled in a broader project of transformation and social justice" (Caruthers & Friend, 2014, p. 15) if teachers deliberately utilize technology as a tool for dialectic transformation (Schneider & Smith, 2014). These researchers have suggested that such critical online pedagogies might include critically framed discussions and self-reflection (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015), digital storytelling (Guajardo, Oliver, Valadez, Cantu, and Guajardo, 2011), and collaborative writing and coproduced texts (Caruthers & Friend, 2014).

While a large and growing body of research addresses the broader question of online/blended learning experiences, the extant body of research regarding pedagogy and student experiences in professional doctoral programs is slim (Jean-Marie & Normore, 2010) and studies regarding the use of technology in EdD programs, socially just or otherwise, is practically nonexistent. The few exceptions (e.g., Kumar 2014; McLeod & Richardson, 2011) specifically address educational doctorate programs for educational technology. This signals that an inquiry into the use of blended learning in professional educational doctorate programs would speak to Jean-Marie and Normore's (2010) call for the building of a "scholarly foundation that will guide the vision of graduate education—especially at the doctoral level" (p. 8).

METHODS

Research Site

California State University, East Bay (CSUEB) is located on the pacific coast of the United States. The college itself, which is classified as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI), is one of the most diverse in the nation (CSUEB, 2015). The ELSJ EdD program reflects the diversity of the rest of the campus—at the time of this study, the makeup of all three cohorts, a total of 62 enrolled doctoral students, was 24% Latino, 24% White, 36% Black, 11% Asian (Chinese, Pakistani, and Vietnamese) and 5% Middle Eastern (Turkish and Irani). The program itself is a full-time, three-year program with a curricular focus on critical theories of education, educational change, and leadership. One of the authors of this paper, Brad, joined the ELSJ program as the new director in the fall of 2014. In speaking with faculty and students, he found two major concerns. First, they felt the structure of the program (e.g., students taking two or three courses and meeting face-to-face on 12-18 times a quarter) inhibited full-time educators and administrators from enrolling in the program.

Second, the same program structure blocked many students from completing the degree on time or prevented them to competing it at all. These concerns echoed those he had encountered teaching and conducting research in his previous position within an EdD program in Chicago, IL, which was also designed for full-time working educators and administrators. To address the aforementioned concerns, the various parties supported creating a hybrid, online program. The program would consist of 60% face-to-face meetings, while 40% of the coursework would be online. For several months, Brad, the EdD program director, worked steadfastly to market the program to students who might have been be reticent to enroll in a doctoral program that would not provide the time to complete their degrees or who may have felt a fully online program would not provide intellectually stimulating coursework or opportunities to learn from their colleagues or instructors.

The participants for our study included 20 students from our incoming 2015 cohort who were taking three summer courses, each taught by one of the authors. Of these students, 15 identified as female and five male. They ranged in age from late twenties to late fifties, and represented a range of educational careers, including teachers, P-16 administrators, K-12 district personnel, and higher education counselors. The group also included six Black, four White, four Latino, four Asian, and two Middle Eastern students. In addition, because we conducted an action research study, we--the three authors of this paper, Katie, Bobbie, and Brad—are also central participants. We discuss our backgrounds and characteristics further in the trustworthiness section.

Action Research

To make our own practices a site for learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999), for this study we adopted a qualitative, action research design (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). Action research is a method of inquiry that hinges on educators studying the effects of their actions, usually collaboratively, and using that knowledge for transformative purposes. As a methodology, the first implementation of action research is usually ascribed to Kurt Lewin in the 1940s as a way to test theories in practical situations and observe their usefulness and applicability (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2009). Action research, even in its nascent form, was a major departure from positivist research epistemologies and methods, and was roundly rejected by the social science community (Carr, 2006). Rather than regarding research as an activity that is conducted by an objective, distant researcher, research views knowledge as socially constructed, and the researcher as actively and necessarily involved in that knowledge construction (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2009).

Following Carr (2006), we regard action research as a “rehabilitation of practical philosophy” (p. 428) that aligns with and supports our goals in multiple ways. First, action research as practical philosophy means putting educational theories and philosophies to work for transformative purposes—that is, the pursuit of *praxis* (Carr, 2006; Freire, 1970). Action research also aligns with our purposes of improving our hybrid pedagogies and, in turn, our ability to work with students toward socially just knowledge and action in schools and communities. Finally, the underlying tenets of action research are theoretically coherent with our positions as social justice educators. Grounded in Freire’s (1970) cycle of inquiry, action research can be utilized as a critical tool to analyze problems of practice, gain new insights, and use those for transformative action. As such, action research offers a ground-up, iterative change process.

Data Collection and Analysis

Although action research methodologists have proposed multiple methods of inquiry, we adopt the cyclical steps suggested by Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007 (p. 20): Develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening; implement this plan; observe the effects of this plan in action; and reflect on these effects as a basis for future planning and action. Our original plan of action encompassed the move of the program from fully face-to-face to a hybrid model, where approximately 60% of the course was provided in-person on campus at the university, and 40% was provided online, through the learning platform Blackboard. As we implemented the original plan of action that was developed (the blended learning format with attention to enacting socioculturally-grounded and socially just practices), we collected multiple forms of data across the summer 2015 term to gauge the effects of our plan in action. We, the three faculty members participating in the study, met multiple times to discuss our practices and student responses to them. During these meetings, one of us took notes to record the key points of the discussions and the learning and reframing that had occurred through our dialogue. These served as an important meaning-making process for us. As Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) noted, “dialogue provides rigor for understandings because the ideas that emerge are strengthened, supported, transformed, and energized.”

A second data source encompassed informal conversations with students both in-person and via email. Some of these conversations were initiated by us to probe student experiences with the hybrid coursework and their emerging understandings of social justice issues in educational leadership, while others were unsolicited in-person or email exchanges that students initiated. We formalized our learning from these interactions through summary reflective narratives regarding our summer course experiences with our students. Finally, we also designed a qualitative student survey, using Google forms for anonymity and ease of recording. We used open-ended questions to probe for understandings we could use to reconstruct analysis of student experiences. We asked questions such as: “Describe your prior experiences in classes that were either held entirely or partially online. How does the experience this summer compare to previous experiences?” and “Do you feel that the current iterations of hybrid courses provide a comparable experience to a purely face to face format? Please explain.” 18 students out of 20 students (90%) responded to the survey.

Once data were collected, we each individually read the student surveys, engaging in a first level of analysis that encompassed familiarizing ourselves with the data and beginning to note initial patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 2009). We then compiled initial themes with corresponding evidence and exchanged these via email. The first author then conducted a round of axial coding, synthesizing these initial patterns into larger themes (Saldana, 2015). Finally, all three researchers reconvened to discuss the larger categories that had been constructed by author #1, dialoguing about each category, “codes” that had been subsumed into the category, and corresponding evidence from student and our own data sources. We then collaboratively formalized these categories into our “findings” for our first round of inquiry and used them to create a modified action plan for moving forward, which we present in later sections.

Trustworthiness and Positionality

Rather than a concern with validity, or the notion that we could report the objective truth, we sought to achieve trustworthiness--the notion that a study’s findings are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In addition to strategies of transparency of method, aim, and theoretical grounding, we also understand the importance of practicing reflexivity in relation to our investigation (Tracy, 2010). We are three White, cisgendered faculty members, and our backgrounds as K-12 educators and administrators in urban environments serving mainly high-poverty students of color, as well as our critical orientations, inform our commitment to prepare educators to advocate on behalf of such students. Moreover, we share a desire to improve both our own pedagogical practices and the overall student experience in our doctoral program, which spurred us to undertake this study. As members of the dominant White culture in privileged university positions, we understand that our background experiences differ from the majority of our students. However, our previous positions as K-12 teachers and administrators provide us with particular “insider” experiences and knowledge shared by our students. However, we readily acknowledge that the accounts and interpretations provided here are value-laden and shaped by our own experiences and biographies, and thus the knowledge generated through this study is admittedly partial (Lather, 1992).

FINDINGS

In the following section, we present a summary of the initial findings from our first action research cycle. Overall, students articulated both enabling and constraining aspects of their experiences with the three hybrid summer courses we provided. When examining our own dialogues and reflective narratives, we found that the nascent state of our own hybrid pedagogies, coupled with deep-set resistances to online instruction and a notable preference for face-to-face interac-

tion, were contributing factors to tensions and struggles for students with the online coursework. Although we hoped to generate evidence that would help us understand how our own emerging practices related to the development of social justice-focused, critical scholar-practitioners, most of the data we collected focused on student experiences with hybrid coursework more generally. Below, we have organized our findings into three main sections describing the constraining and enabling aspects that emerged from students' data and our own personal and pedagogical contributions to our students' experiences with hybrid learning.

The Constraints of Online Instruction

Mainly, students reported that the activities professors created for online classes did not achieve the same level of authentic dialogue as an in-class conversation. Students commented, for example, that discussion boards produced "forced responses from peers" that felt "artificial" and "seemed to take away the human element of communication." Some students also felt that the online activities were more about task completion than real learning. They stated that online assignments felt like "busy work" that was "about getting points rather than meaningful engagement." Another mentioned, "the amount of work in many assignments did what I call 'tipping the scales' toward less learning and more proving reading was completed." Further, activities that work in class do not always translate well into an online format. For example, one student referenced the activity where they had to answer questions, share their answers via email, then comment on another's paper, and then send it back; the student reported that this process took too much time and, in the end, was not as powerful as doing so in class.

Students also shared that they found the blackboard sites between the three professors to be designed very differently. One student felt that "each teacher had a different way of doing things, which added to the confusion," and another thought it would be helpful if "professors use the system in a more uniform way." In some cases, students relayed that expectations for the activities were unclear, with one noting, "there were mixed messages being sent from different professors." Clarity of course navigation and instructions for assignments were points that were also raised. Two students remarked that they "were not always clear how to operate functions like turning in papers," and "it was sometimes a scavenger hunt to locate readings, assignments, etc. this quarter." A third student wrote, "I can't figure [the course assignments] out for myself." Another similarly conveyed, "The communication between what was assigned through blackboard, personal email, university email and in class didn't always match, requiring hours of study to just figure out the assignment." These concerns were echoed in emails to faculty, with students reporting that they "struggled tremendously" with organization and mismatch between the online course and professor communication.

From a combination of student comments on the surveys and in class, email conversations, and our own informal conversations with students, a third important theme emerged—the issue of access. For instance, several students reported difficulty accessing the digital platform and tools. One email received by Bobbie regarding this issue said, " It is a bit frustrating about the online tools. I can see that they could be amazing, IF they worked. I have trouble just logging in." Yet, others were able to access the coursework, videos, and other media with ease, leading us to theorize that the level of experience with digital platforms and media seemed to contribute to differential access between students--some students were either very comfortable with technology or had previous experience with online instruction, and these students generally reported positive experiences with the hybrid summer course activities. Others who either self-reported as being resistant to heavy technological use or as inexperienced with online learning found the experience itself much more difficult, and in particular, time-consuming. As an additional factor contributing to differential experiences, the students also varied in their access to up-to-date computers and reliable broadband WiFi, which was necessary to support the learning platform.

Enabling Elements of Hybridity

A tension was revealed between students who felt the hybridity was important for flexibility and time management, but acknowledged that the face-to-face meetings yielded more powerful learning. For example, eight of the 18 students discussed the merits of online instruction. One noted the dual affordance of flexibility for job and religious observance, "I think it is necessary not only for working professionals but also for respecting religious practice needs…I was quick to come to learn the appeal of the learning experience." Another described the hybridity of the program as the reason for choosing it over others, "For some of us who work full time and have families, having the online portion is what makes the program accessible." A third explained, "I wouldn't give up the hybrid [program component] because it affords us the opportunity to work and still be active participants in classes." In an email to faculty, another student lauded this aspect of the program as well, "I love the EdD program, how it is set up for full-time employees." Also commenting on the access the program's hybrid structure provided, a student who lives more than sixty miles from our campus noted, "I didn't have two hours or more of commute time to get to class, which keep costs, stress, and time to a minimum."

In addition to the notes above about the importance of flexibility, time management, and family/life/work balance, three students also described their appreciation for the ways that the online portions fostered learner autonomy, with one student expressing, "[Online classes] promoted the shift from 'good student' to independent scholarly researcher." In addition, two other students further described the particular linguistic aspects of the hybrid format. One described the benefit of being able to compose an answer in writing, which she felt was helpful because "it gives me time to think about what I want to say and choose carefully words that better represent my thoughts." A second student noted that online activities provide her with the luxury of additional processing time, which is important to her as a language learner. These response stood out to us, as supporting our culturally and linguistically diverse students—who must learn sophisticated, graduate-level academic English while also learning program content—is an important social justice goal for our program.

One student also mentioned that the online opportunities also helped facilitate discussions of "sensitive" topics (such as those regarding issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on), which may have made students feel more vulnerable in a face-to face-format. As faculty, we were conflicted about this statement. The ELSJ program interprets social justice as disrupting entrenched inequalities in the US educational system that disproportionately affect historically marginalized students of color. To develop this stance, our students must engage in critical conversations about how these inequalities were and are created and maintained—conversations that can, at times, be difficult and uncomfortable. On the one hand, an online space may *protect* students from feelings of discomfort—particularly those of the dominant power group—and perhaps make it more likely that they participate in a conversation. Yet, it also

means that students may choose to enter into such a discussion superficially or even disengage entirely—something that is not so easily done in a face-to-face setting.

However, the tension between the enabling elements noted above and the drawbacks of online instruction were apparent. As mentioned previously, several students felt strongly that online activities were not as authentic or interactive as face-to-face sessions, the assignments felt like busy work, and collaboration between students was more difficult. In the questionnaire, two students explicitly stated their preference for in-person educational formats for the program. One opined that, "there should be more face to face sessions," while another acknowledged that, "If I had enough time, I would rather have all sessions face-to-face."

Faculty Knowledge and Practices

In our dialogues and written narratives, three ideas emerged that connected with the reports of our students. One encompassed the limiting nature of our own emergent pedagogical skills regarding hybrid pedagogy. Although the three of us have many years of experience teaching both students and adult learners in face-to-face formats, and consider ourselves skilled with planning and enacting highly interactive lessons with ample opportunities for critical dialogue, we were/are novices in terms of providing the same in a blended platform. The limits of our technological teaching expertise surfaced in our student data in very concrete ways—such as attempting to simply move the same activity structures one would use in class into an online format, failing to provide adequate directions for online assignments, and offering a course platform that was not as organized or easily navigable as it needed to be. As Bobbie noted in a reflective narrative,

> I need additional training and experience with online instruction to make discussion boards and other learner-learner interaction more meaningful and less cumbersome…I also need to consider synchronous discussions, including my interaction with small online discussion groups, but my lack of technology acumen currently prevents me from doing this.

As our lack of experience adversely affected our students' experiences, we are committed to learning from our initial course design and delivery and continuing to expand our professional knowledge in this area as part of our second cycle of inquiry, a topic we discuss in the next section.

However, we realized that we do bring valuable knowledge and skills that we need to draw on as we move forward. Brad, for example, has studied and written about male-centered computing culture, and he recognized that he had failed to tap into this expertise when orienting students to the program. He reflected,

> I should have accounted for the fact that many female students are often reticent to use computing technology in online formats because computing technology is a male-centered artifact and its culture typically focuses on male-centered interests (Margolis & Fisher, 2003). Since the vast majority of students in the EdD program are female educators and professionals who have never used course management software learn, there may have been an immediate reticence to use the online platforms to learn.

Finally, from our conversations and reflective writing, we surfaced an inhibiting element we had not considered prior to engaging in this project: the impact that our own orientation to teaching online may have on our students' experiences. Each of us greatly values the relational and human connections involved in teaching and the embodied nature of learning, which Katie described thus: "*a physical, bodily experience that just cannot be replicated in an online environment.*" Describing her own concerns and resistances to online education in a written reflection, Katie shared:

> I care deeply about structuring my pedagogy to provide ample opportunities to engage in meaningful social interaction that allows students to jointly construct knowledge, and I worry that, at least in asynchronous formats, online instruction is an impediment to this type of learning.

As we talked through our concerns, we began to think about the affordances of synchronous learning as another way to mediate the inauthenticity students had discussed. We agreed that we needed to learn about and incorporate online activities providing students with a way to exchange ideas in real time. Not only are such tools promising for increasing student collaboration and co-construction of knowledge, but would perhaps also meet our own needs. As Bobbie explained, "The need for human connection will push me to learn and use more synchronous and live interaction tools in the online environment."

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AN ACTION PLAN FOR MOVING FORWARD

According to many of our students, the hybrid aspect of the ELSJ program provides flexibility to obtain a terminal degree while maintaining their full time jobs, and others noted pedagogical benefits provided by an online format, such as fostering learning autonomy and supporting linguistic aspects of the doctoral experience. From this evidence, we argue that our program is providing multiple entry points to mainly "non-traditional" EdD students, including people of color, those from high poverty backgrounds, and English learners, to pursue their doctorates. Drawing from these "baseline" findings, we argue that some potential exists for our blended program to rupture the status quo profile of "doctoral student"—that is, White with college-educated parents (NCES, 2011; 2012). Yet, without addressing questions of inauthentic, task-orientation tendencies of online instruction, questions of technological skill and access, and our own online pedagogical expertise, we run the very real risk of contributing to inequalities we seek to disrupt. Below, we share components of our revised action plan, which takes into consideration our own and our students' experiences and responses to hybrid teaching and learning, and begins to more explicitly address our program's mission to provide opportunities for students to gain critical insights for becoming transformative leaders.

Technological supports for students. Recognizing that some students need additional practice with the specific technological platform we use, we have created a technology lab module devoted entirely to the Learning Management System, Blackboard, prior to the first quarter of instruction. The module, which will be co-taught by an instructor and a technology assistant to reduce the teacher-instructor ratio and ensure any necessary technical assistance is available, will be offered on three different dates and times to fit stu-

dent schedules. As a module outcome, students will be required to demonstrate a minimum proficiency with Blackboard on a “module mastery test,” that will require them to show mastery of basic skills such as posting to the discussion board and submitting an assignment through a designated link. For differentiation, students who have previous experience with this platform can attempt the module mastery test during the lab sessions or at any point prior to the first quarter of instruction to demonstrate their mastery.

While we hope that by ensuring that all students have mastered a basic proficiency with Blackboard, we can mediate some of the issues that may contribute to student challenges with accessibility and navigability, we know that some students may struggle with technological access due to financial hardship. While we do not have a concrete plan in place as of the writing of this paper, we are investigating options to ensure that all students who enter the doctoral program have access to a portable device that can reliably connect to the Internet and support Blackboard use, as well as contain necessary word processing software. One possibility may include the ELSJ program purchasing a library of laptop computers that doctoral students may check out on a quarterly basis. However, it is clear the program must account for the fact that some of our students do not have the financial resources to secure functioning technology to access material and complete assignments in a timely manner.

Quality Matters training. One of the logistical issues raised by students concerned issues with consistency between professors in terms of technological use and ease of navigating the Blackboard site, and we recognized that organization and navigability were manifestations of the limits of our own technological expertise. To address this issue, the three of us have taken Quality Matters training, and are in the process of building certified courses, as well as becoming peer reviewers. Quality Matters is a federal initiative developed in response to the proliferation of online and blended programs in K-12 and higher education that ensures online classes are designed in ways that are accessible, navigable, interactive, and appropriately rigorous. By developing our expertise and courses according to Quality Matters standards, the three of us can align ourselves in terms of course structure as well as improve course navigability and accessibility.

Interrogating our own practices. As a faculty, in the spring of 2015 we engaged in a two-day professional development opportunity with recognized experts in the field of educational technology to build our expertise in providing quality blended learning experiences. Yet we recognize that providing faculty two days of professional activities does little to prepare them to provide most students with a positive online learning environment and meaningful, deep learning opportunities (as opposed to exercises that are mere tasks to complete). While the three authors of this paper have sought out additional and ongoing development, we also realize that this effort has to expand to include our entire faculty. As a department, we must inquire into and problematize our own online pedagogical practices to examine how we can provide our students with more meaningful experiences that invite them to interrogate critical issues of social justice in schools and larger society; foster student collaboration in an online format; and help students navigate the online management systems in order to complete their assignments, locate readings, and communicate with their instructors. Finally, we must actively involve our students in this process, as they are the social actors who yearn for humanizing educational learning experiences, yet may be forced to learn in unfamiliar environment. We must interrogate how computing technology and culture can be altered to become humanizing forces for learning, instead of becoming sources of alienation.

Interrogating the intersection of social justice and computing technology. As the EdD Program moves forward with educating the next cohort of historically underrepresented minorities who are classroom instructors or in senior leadership positions across the Bay Area, there is an urgent need to create dialogue and inquiry in relation to how computing technology can be merged with social justice concerns (Miller, Becker, & Becker, 2016). In particular, faculty members in the EdD program must interrogate why computing technology and culture have alienated numerous historically marginalized and female students from engaging in learning activities in higher education (Carr & Porfilio, 2009), while concomitantly reflecting on ways in which computing technology and its culture can be reimagined to position our students to become transformative leaders. In essence, computing technology cannot function as a roadblock preventing our students from engaging in learning experiences that stifle their ability and desire to eliminate oppression and to promote social change both inside and outside their institutions. Instead, educational technology must become a central component in providing students a learning environment where they gain the knowledge, skills, and courage necessary to become transformative leaders who begin with “questions of justice and democracy, critique inequitable practices, and address both individual and public good” (Shields, 2010, p. 558). Furthermore, our students must get beyond commonplace thinking that computing technology will *a priori* improve learning inside of schools and the quality of life outside educational institutions, and develop a robust vision of how educational technology can support learning activities and classroom environments designed to support students’ and educators’ understandings of the word and the world (Freire, 1970) as well as be applied outside of schooling structures to promote equity and social justice (Porfilio, 2016).

Integrating Social Justice More Explicitly in Online Assignments. In this initial inquiry cycle, the responses of our students, and indeed, our own conversations and reflections, tended to focus on topics like “authenticity” and “collaboration” rather than specific social justice topics or foci. Part of our plan of action is to ensure that we are, indeed, incorporating critical activities in our online portions of our classes. The assignments will be designed to helping students gain an understanding of what is responsible for unbalanced power differentials in schools, their own social circles and in the broader society, instead of focusing on merely increasing student interactions in an online platform. For example, Brad created a critical autoethnography assignment in which students explore their own histories as well as those of their cohort members in relation to issues of race, class, language, gender/sexuality, and so on. Rather than merely generating a written text, the *product* of this assignment will be a digital story. Students will develop a digital artifact with the intention to locating themselves as social actors whose views on leadership have been mediated by being members of dominant or subordinate social groups during their lifetime (Tatum, 2002). They will also reflect upon how they, as educational leaders, can work collectively to confront unjust practices and policies continue to hinder the academic, emotional and social development of those occupy subordinate identities inside and outside of educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

As we move into the second cycle of our action research inquiry, a second round of data collection will be initiated this summer to capture the impact of our revised action plan. In the next round of inquiry, we plan to focus more explicitly on the ways our own practices connect with the social justice focus of our program. The second

cycle will be guided by the question, "How do three educational leadership faculty members construct hybrid pedagogies that support the development of increasingly critical understandings for students?" To generate data, we will conduct three focus groups of students, design a second qualitative questionnaire focusing on pedagogical practices, conduct content analysis of revised course design, and document continuing conversations between the three faculty members.

Alongside continued data collection, we also plan to bring more faculty members into our effort, encouraging colleagues to engage in Quality Matters training and critical dialogue about how to best utilize the online portion of our doctoral coursework to meet our larger goals of preparing educational leaders to fight for issues of social justice in K-12 settings and beyond. We also will continue to push ourselves as novice hybrid educators to learn about and use creative digital means for engaging our students in the critical examination of themselves, the use of technology in their own schooling as well as professional contexts, and important questions of transforming schools to more equitably serve historically marginalized student populations.

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