



# Changing the Landscape of Teacher Education Via Online Teaching and Learning

BY MINSUN SHIN AND YOON-JOO LEE

**T**echnological advances in every aspect of today's society create a forum for us, teacher educators, to re-examine existing instructional methods in higher education. Daily lives of our students heavily rely on the use of computers and other electronic devices, and virtual worlds present a wide range of social opportunities through forums, blogs, wikis and chat rooms where communities are born. In order to be responsive and accommodate the changes, traditional instruction methods can't be the only way to reach technolog-

ically-savvy students. Many colleges and universities are beginning to integrate multimedia technologies into teacher education programs and to offer courses via distance/online learning (Leonard & Guha, 2001; Smith, Smith, & Boone, 2000).

As online courses are offered as an alternative to traditional instruction in higher education, there are considerable debates about online teaching and learning. Some believe that online education shows promise as an innovative and creative pedagogical method; sixty-seven percent of colleges and universities agree

that online education is the single significant development and logical long-term strategy for the field of teacher preparation (Ernst 2005), offering flexibility and convenience by providing learning opportunities to anyone, at anytime, and anywhere. On the other hand, some educators hold skeptical views, perceiving distance learning as inadequate and inappropriate substitutes for on-campus and face-to-face instruction. What are the thoughts of the students who took online courses? What do they identify as advantages and disadvantages?

The authors of this article conducted

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a study among the students who were enrolled in a fully online graduate early childhood education program at one of the universities in New Jersey. Responses found that students were satisfied with the online courses and enjoyed the virtual learning experience. They expressed that flexibility, being able to study around their work and personal schedules, is a major advantage of attending the online class. Seventy-five percent of students indicated a willingness to take another online course, even if it were not required.

Just as they articulated several advantages, the students expressed concerns such as the lack of face-to-face interaction in the online environment. It was interesting to notice how individual personalities impacted the students' opinions toward interactions and participation in online courses. While most of the students were able to enjoy the online dialogue, one of the students felt that, as a very social person, much more could be gained from being in a traditional classroom environment and taking part in spontaneous class discussion. If someone is social and interactive, the lack of face-to-face interaction could be unfavorable. On the other hand, another student mentioned, "I am not very assertive and would probably not have communicated with the class and teacher as much as I did online."

From listening to the voices of the students who took online courses, it was evident that full online learning is a more appropriate tool for Internet-savvy students (Olson & Werhen, 2005), and most

of the students are seeking interpersonal interaction in an online environment. The students in our study recommended adding time to meet in person. Their recommendations pointed toward the use of a "hybrid" format in order to improve online courses so that students can receive the benefits of both online and face-to-face courses (Zirkle, 2005). It is not surprising that these students still like certain aspects of traditional classroom environments.

In the field of business and technology, people do not want to give up the benefits of face-to-face interactions. Some companies are now launching "no e-mail day" as an answer to stress and lack of productivity in the office. Intel has become the latest in an increasingly long line of companies to launch "e-mail free Friday." Intel engineers are encouraged to talk to each other face-to-face or pick up the phone on Fridays rather than rely on e-mail. While some business sectors are trying to insert some old-fashion means of communication, the field of education is adapting technology at an uncharacteristically rapid pace without careful considerations.

Here comes the challenge we need to ponder: how do we respond to the demand of technology usage in the classroom, as well as provide interpersonal learning interaction in online environments? It is inevitable that technology and multimedia applications will be an integral part of the learning environment. Online education has been and will

continuously change the landscape of higher education. In order to make online education more effective and applicable to students, a "hybrid" format seems to address the participants' major concerns related to the ways in which the online learning community is formed and maintained. When a traditional classroom environment and online world are combined, students are likely to benefit from the best of both worlds. ■

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