The Impact of Web Communities and Online Literature Circles on Teacher Efficacy

Significance/Importance

According to Covington and Beery (1976), schools have the responsibility of cultivating a student’s motivation to learn, teachers must foster a high level of confidence and achievement in their students, and provide students with the encouragement they need to believe in themselves; without an increase in competence and confidence neither will prosper. A positive classroom climate is critical in increasing student motivation and achievement. An overwhelming number of pre-service teachers lack the confidence in their ability to teach children with extenuating life circumstances (e.g. severe behavior problems, child abuse victims, child obesity, academic failure, etc…). Alderman (2004) calls this phenomenon a lack of teacher efficacy which she defines as, “the extent to which teachers believe that they have the capacity to affect student performance” (p. 184). Because a teacher’s sense of efficacy is an excellent predictor of future student success (Alderman, 2004), teachers with low efficacy or negative and biased attitudes will not be able to create the environments necessary for student motivation and achievement. Noddings (1992) stresses the importance of the teacher’s role in teaching children to be the “recipients of care” (p. 108); children that have not learned to do this are at risk of failure. It is clear that teachers plagued with self-doubt will not be up to the task of helping or motivating struggling students. Teacher educators have a responsibility to help prepare their pre-service teachers with the tools they need to teach children with extenuating life circumstances.

Learning communities provide opportunities for open dialogue between pre-service teachers and university faculty. Dede (2004) states that the “defining quality of a learning community is that there is a culture of learning in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding” (p. 16). Meyers (1995) also emphasizes the role collaboration plays in facilitating teachers’ understanding of student attitudes and problems, and gains in long term academic achievement. Online communities offer pre-service teachers a chance to openly discuss concerns related to their responsibilities as future educators. Because communication can occur at any time, advancing technologies (e.g. web communities, email, etc…) offer unique opportunities for creating supportive learning environments. Online communities (e.g. threaded discussion forums, online literature circles, etc…), “have the potential to alter the way new teachers communicate with one another (peer support) as well as with other professionals (collaborative consultation)” (DeWert, Babinski, & Jones, 2003), and provide an opportunity for discussion and reflection of critical issues related to student achievement. Realistic fiction, dealing with the realities of human problems and relationships, provides the perfect catalyst for discussing critical issues (i.e. teaching children with behavior problems, etc….) in a safe supportive environment. Online literature circles, incorporating realistic fiction, allow teacher educators to promote critical thinking and comprehension of these issues related to the professional growth of pre-service teachers. Online literature discussions, “optimally blend reader response and technology as a medium for literature discussions,” encouraging “text-to-life” and “text-to-text connections” (Hancock, 2004).
Web communities that incorporate online literature circles and threaded discussions provide the means for teacher educators to facilitate pre-service teachers’ personal and professional connection to critical issues relevant to today’s children and families.

Objectives

The objectives of this poster session are to demonstrate ways to: (a) establish collaborative web communities between pre-service teachers and university faculty, (b) (c) connect pre-service teachers to the critical issues facing children and families in today’s society via collaborative online literature circles using realistic fiction, and (c) foster a sense of empathy, professional responsibility, and teacher efficacy in pre-service teachers through the use of web communities.

References


