



ARTICLE:

DEEPENING ONLINE LEARNING: FORMING AN INTERACTIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY BY FUSING A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM WITH A LIVE CLASSROOM

by Ms. Holly Cohen, MEd, NCSP and Dr. Bonnie Botel-Sheppard, Executive Director of The Penn Literacy Network of The University of Pennsylvania

(With contributions by Shannah Estep, Nathalie Umana, Caroline Gershwin and Joan Cusano)

WHAT WE LEARNED:

Through technology, The Penn Literacy Network (PLN) of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education has extended its reach in a unique way that could benefit the University at large as well as other universities across the country and the world. The success of The Penn Literacy Network grew from the life's work of GSE Emeritus Professor and former President of the International Reading Association, the late Dr. Morton Botel. Since 1981 his philosophy has encouraged long-term educator collaboration that has resulted in successful and enduring partnerships with over 34,000 teachers, coaches, administrators, and families across the country and around the world. He realized that to form a community of learners, educators needed to regularly step out of their classrooms to ask questions and share ideas and insights.

The platform for this course featured live and virtual settings. Taking part in the course were ten educators from the Greater Philadelphia area as well as twenty educators from California Office to Reform Education (CORE) districts, including teachers and leaders from Los Angeles, Sacramento, and the Bay Area. The credit-bearing web-based course, PLN 12A: "Helping Students Needing Learning Support in a Literacy-Rich Inclusive Classroom" focused on the literacy and learning needs of at-risk/struggling learners in their classrooms. Course readings and class activities drew from the special education field, current knowledge about brain biology and the PLN frameworks-The Four Lenses of Learning and The Five Reading Writing Talking Processes. Participants learned theory and practice for immediate application with their students. This webinar featured a live classroom with educators from The Greater Philadelphia Area that was synchronously offered through Adobe Connect to our California participants/colleagues.

This webinar was organized by PLN's Executive Director Dr. Bonnie Botel-Sheppard, PLN facilitator Ms. Holly Cohen, GSE alum Caroline Gershwin and our California Ed colleagues

Shannah Estep, Director of CORE's Standards, Assessment and Instruction Initiative and Nathalie Umana, now a Senior Program Associate with Scale Up in California.

CORE educators logged onto each of five class sessions and experienced interactive teaching and participated individually or in small groups, offering their thoughts and experiences through a live chat box. They had direct access to a wiki space set up for this classroom community containing the syllabus, resources, class schedule and fields for discussion. Each class began with brief introductions of all participants. Following the first session and in all subsequent sessions, online and on-site participants shared the interactive strategies they adapted in their educational settings based on the PLN Frameworks. In addition, the chat room input was shared with the live participants to enrich the conversation and ensure everyone had the opportunity to respond and ask questions. As is the practice in all PLN courses, readings that applied to the particular PLN Frameworks taught in that session were shared in a variety of engaging ways such as text renderings and pair/shares. Content was demonstrated and experienced through a variety of engaging Before During and After activities tied to The PLN Frameworks: The Five Reading Writing Talking Processes and The Four Lenses of Learning. Participants immediately applied the information discussed with opportunities for adaptation for their classrooms with a focus on brain biology as related to literacy development. Information learned was summarized followed by readings and assignments for the next class.

As teachers often teach in isolation, the opportunity to partner within an interactive online format allowed for rich ideas to be exchanged and adapted. This coursework confirmed our hunch that combining live and online opportunities could successfully connect learning communities from various parts of the country (and the world). It allowed for a social look at learning that considered regional and national best practices and approaches. Webinars are typically taught asynchronously, or if they are live, are responses to a lecture rather than an interactive classroom. This approach allowed for a redefining of who makes up a learning community and how it is formed and nurtured.

As this experience merged a face-to-face classroom community and synchronous and asynchronous platforms, content and technology needed to work efficiently. It was crucial to address classroom layout to allow participants to effectively work together while encouraging our online participants to see, hear and respond via the chat box.

WHAT WE LEARNED:

Set Up:

We learned that we needed expert IT support before and throughout the entire course experience in order to ensure smooth and successful implementation of course content. Our IT person was a critical player. From set up to ongoing implementation he was a reassuring presence allowing the instructors to successfully deliver course content. Our IT person set up Adobe Connect allowing online access for our California participants including a chat room. He

assisted with classroom set up and he was logged on to help troubleshoot any and all technology related issues.

Preliminary Technology Check-in for Webinar Participants:

Joan Cusano, PLN's Technology Coordinator, discovered the need for a computer check-in at the beginning of each class for webinar participants to insure that they could hear, see and respond to the live classroom experience.

Camera Angle:

In order to merge an online and face to face learning experience, there are crucial components to consider and address. For example, something seemingly small, like the camera angle turned out to be a major issue. We learned that managing the video camera needed to be in the hands of one highly competent IT person who was present 100% of the time. He could appropriately zoom in, zoom out and pan the live classroom. The camera angle needed to smoothly capture the participants' and the instructors' movements and activities so as not to distract from the online participants' learning experiences.

Volume:

We learned that on-site class space required either hand held microphones or lavalier microphones while other class space could adequately pick up the sound. Additionally, each online participant needed to log in to a single computer. In one case multiple participants logged in from one person's account to multiple computers, muffling the sound quality.

Room Set-up:

The classroom was arranged at a circular table to allow in-class participants to work in small groups or dyads. This arrangement lent itself to a working classroom where online participants could watch the interaction. The goal was to provide the opportunity for thoughtful conversations regarding the live sessions and how it applied to their roles in education.

Moderator:

Shannah Estep, speaking for the CORE participants noted the following about the importance of a course moderator: It is critical to the success of interactive, web-based teaching and learning to have the assistance of a moderator. Someone who can monitor the chat box and engage the group in discussion when the presenter/facilitator is busy teaching the class. The moderator is essentially the conduit between the virtual world and the live teaching should this be a synchronous experience.

Nathalie Umana also noted that in addition to the Philadelphia chat room moderator, a California chat room moderator was critical. Our moderators encouraged initially reticent

participants by repeating course facilitator questions, prompting and summarizing responses and keeping track of online and on-site participants' input.

Chat Box:

Caroline Gershwin commented that participants could use the chat box to ask a question, answer a yes or no question, introduce themselves, add a comment to the live conversation, or choose not to participate based on comfort level and interest.

The Value of an Accessible Course Wiki Space:

The virtual classroom was set up on wikispaces.com. It was organized into class sessions. Each session included the schedule, handouts, articles, and a discussion board. This allowed in class and online participants to have course information readily available at their fingertips.

TAKE AWAYS:

Our hunch that educators would greatly appreciate opportunities to watch and listen to teachers engage in an effective classroom learning environment was confirmed. Participants benefited from collaboration with their cross-country peers, automatically placing this information into their own thinking and frameworks of practice to support an engaged literate classroom environment. Almost immediately our California colleagues provided live chat examples relevant to their classrooms and experience, expanding the work of our on-site participants. The use of the wiki space allowed all participants to download activities prior to each session and if they chose, to actively engage in real time demonstrations and discussions with their cross country colleagues rather than be passive recipients.

POSSIBILITIES:

This model provides another way to expand a community of educators. To consider this model for your own program think about:

1. How you plan to organize and ready your course content for this platform.
2. Preliminary and ongoing technology needs and support.
3. Consider the make-up and size of your classroom and online community to accommodate live and online needs.
4. Frequent and encouraging ways to have online participants express themselves.
5. Staff available to monitor the online participants' platform as well as the camera angle.

CLOSING COMMENTS:

From Joan Cusano:

This cost-effective distance-learning model provides a unique opportunity to blend components of a face-to-face classroom environment with the benefit of collegial conversations among educators across the country without incurring travel expenses. This model extends professional development possibilities by providing a platform for learning and reflection about best teaching practices.

From Caroline Gershwin:

Traditional professional learning webinars tend to be asynchronous and do not require active learner participation. By combining a live setting with a virtual setting online participants' engagement and feelings of accountability to the learning community can be increased. As a result, learning for all participants can be deepened in many subject areas.

From Shannah Estep:

This kind of professional learning can add tremendous value to the participating university as well as school districts and other learning organizations. With time being so valuable and dollars being so limited, the virtual world will certainly be the mechanism for many districts across the country and across the world to engage their teachers and leaders in professional learning, sharing and networking.

The participants on the west coast commented on how much they enjoyed the live interaction on the other end. Many teachers are accustomed to virtual learning but the group of educators that participated in this course considered the synchronous platform a "great balance between the web-based world with live teachers and leaders working across the country on similar problems of practice".

For more information about The Penn Literacy Network please visit us at:

www.gse.upenn.edu/pln

Please check out The Penn Literacy Network Facebook Account on our Penn Literacy Network Facebook Account and follow us on twitter @PennLitNetwork .