

USING BLACKBOARD AND SKYPE FOR MENTORING BEGINNING TEACHERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of the Blackboard and Skype-based electronic mentoring system for beginning teachers. The Quality Teachers for Quality Students project developed an electronic mentoring system between beginning teachers and experienced teachers to support beginning teachers' instructional and classroom management skills in regards to the unique needs of English Language Learners (ELL) in Southern California. The data analysis indicated that the combination of using Blackboard and Skype tools were beneficial to beginning teachers' effective teaching of ELL.

Introduction

This paper describes the electronic mentoring activities delivered by Blackboard and Skype for beginning teachers related to the Video Self-Reflection activity conducted by the Quality Teachers for Quality Students (QTQS) project during 2007–2010. The mentoring activity was part of the Quality Teachers for Quality Students (QTQS) induction program at a University in Southern California, funded by the U.S. Department of Education in 2007. The QTQS project developed an electronic mentoring system between beginning teachers (mentees) and experienced teachers (mentors) at the ratio of three or four mentees per mentor to support beginning teachers' instructional skills in regards to the unique needs of English Language Learners (ELL) in San Bernardino County, California.

Public schools in San Bernardino County serve one of the largest populations of high-need children in California. There are a total of 91,721 Limited English Language Learner (ELL) students, one of the largest concentrations of ELL in both the state and nation. According to CA Department of Education (2009–10), approximately 62 percent of the students in San Bernardino County are socioeconomically disadvantaged and approximately 73 percent of the students are students with diverse ethnic backgrounds: 51% Hispanic or Latino, 27% Caucasian, 9% Asian, 7% African American, and 6% representing multiple or

other ethnicities. In addition to a significant percentage of students living in poverty, schools in this county face enormous challenges in meeting state standardized proficiency levels. California Standardized Testing and Reports 2010 indicate that significant numbers of ELLs in this County are at risk of educational failure in both English-Language Arts and Mathematics. More than 82% of 2nd to 11th grade ELLs failed to meet adequate proficiency levels in the California Standardized Test (CST) English-Language Arts in 2010. More than 73% of 2nd to 11th grade ELLs failed in the CST Mathematics. More than 82% of 5th, 8th, and 10th grade ELLs failed to meet adequate proficiency levels in the CST Science.

Beginning teachers in this county face enormous challenges. Novice teachers are expected to overcome the demands of a new job, deal with the varying needs of these students, improve their academic achievement, and meet state and school wide expectations from the first day they enter the classroom. There is an acute need for providing support and mentoring to new teachers to overcome new challenges and to develop self-reliance (Gilbert, 2005; Gold, 1992; Hicks, Glasgow, & McNary, 2004; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000). Studies show that a supportive, nonjudgmental mentoring system greatly benefits beginning teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Evertson & Smithey, 2000).

In order to meet the needs of beginning teachers in this county, the QTQS project developed a web-based system of ongoing mentorship, training, and support for beginning teachers, creating a network of professional interchange between new teachers, exemplary experienced teachers, and university faculty. This system provided initial training and orientation, ongoing support, frequent updates and current issues in student achievement, best instruction practices, and individual mentoring support from online mentors to address immediate concerns. The goals of this web-based system support the development of an electronic professional learning community directed by the needs of the group and the provision of the support needed to retain teachers in a high-need county. Online communities enable mentee and mentor teachers to collaborate and reflect with each other (Hunter, 2002) and to be connected as if they are in one place together (Goldberger, 2003), which reduces a beginning teacher's feeling of isolation. A web-based community provides teachers with a collaborative learning space to discuss and exchange ideas and strategies via chat rooms, e-mail, and postings (Leask & Younie, 2001) and to support and guide each other (Bond, 2004; Cornu, 2004; Matei, 2005).

This paper focuses mainly on the electronic mentoring components of the QTQS induction activities. The following elements of the QTQS project related to electronic mentoring are addressed in this paper: 1.) electronic mentoring activities — Blackboard system set up and electronic tasks; 2.) Video-based Self Reflection of Instruction (VSRI) activity — VSRI Checklist, procedures of VSRI, and mentoring; and 3.) evaluation of electronic mentoring system — survey instrument, data analysis, and summary of findings.

Electronic Mentoring Activities

The project created an electronic mentoring system using Blackboard in 2007. Blackboard is an online electronic system which allows mentees, mentors, and university faculty to share and communicate at their own pace. The project has also adopted the video conference feature of Skype since fall of 2008 to address certain limitations of Blackboard functions. Blackboard and Skype were adopted for the project's electronic mentoring because online mentoring reduces the time constraints of face-to-face mentoring, allowing teachers to communicate and receive constructive feedback at times that best suit them (Dempsey, Arthur-Kelly, & Carty, 2009).

Blackboard System Set Up

The project organized the Blackboard interactive communication system by providing participants with proper access, loading announcements and other directions, setting up student accounts, and creating and monitoring mentor groups. The project orientation meetings and two Blackboard workshops were offered for two days. The purpose of the orientation meeting was to provide overall information on the project goal, objectives, yearly timeline, and responsibilities of all involved. The purpose of the Blackboard workshops was to provide information on how to log in, use Blackboard features, and participate in the learning community. Thirteen mentees and four mentors were divided into four groups. Mentor-mentee dyads participated in the QTQS mentoring activities.

Electronic Tasks

The QTQS project created 22 electronic tasks for mentors and mentees during 2007–2010. The tasks were developed by the QTQS core personnel and reviewed and revised by the project advisory members. Coupled with project coordinator and mentor assistance the tasks were designed for mentees' effective teaching of LEP students as well as their understanding of LEP students' literacy development. As for support with the QTQS tasks, the mentors were available on Blackboard for a three day time period every two weeks to review the first draft of mentee work. It is at this time that the mentors provide constructive feedback to the mentees and scaffold their instruction in order to deepen the mentees' understanding of the content under study. It is through this continuous feedback loop that the mentees are able to improve the quality of the final draft of their assignments/tasks. In order to facilitate project participants' reflective thinking and collaborative learning, three layers of participant structure were created. These layers include individual (Journal Writing), team (Team Space), and the whole class space (Discussion Board). Forums created in each layer build upon one another and were tied to workshop topics and assignments.

Video-based Self-Reflection of Instruction (VSRI)

Mentee teachers were required to video record instruction, followed by the self-evaluation of their teaching using a self-reflection checklist. The video self-reflection of instruction was adopted by the QTQS project because studies indicate that the video-based self-reflection method provides opportunities for teachers to analyze, monitor, and evaluate their teaching instruction (Struyk & McCoy, 1993) and improves their teaching through self-reflection (Lee & Wu, 2006).

VSRI Checklist

The QTQS Video Self-Reflection Checklist consists of 39 items and three reflective questions. The 39 items delineate lesson planning (7 items), lesson opening and implementation (12 items), communication (11 items), assessment (5 items), and classroom management and creating learning environment (4 items). These items are constructed using a Likert scale anchored by strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (6).

Procedures of VSRI

Individual videotaping consisted of 30-40 minutes of instructional communication and interaction with their children. Mentee teachers chose a language arts session involving English Language Learners, developed a lesson plan, had a pre-conference with mentor teacher on the lesson, recorded their teaching, reviewed the recording and reflected upon their instruction using the QTQS Self-Reflection Checklist, and finally, submitted their video and reflection via Blackboard Digital Drop Box. The VSRI activity was conducted two times an academic year. Mentee teachers reviewed the recording privately and reflected upon their instruction using the QTQS Video-based Self-Reflection Instruction (VSRI) checklist. The following describes the main procedures of the Video Reflection of Instruction activity as the mentee teachers:

1. Completed the attached sign-up sheet, including an agreement and consent form on copyright and video use.
2. Chose a period of a language arts lesson involving ELL students.
3. Developed a lesson plan.
4. Had a pre-conference with mentor teachers on the lesson plan.
5. Recorded about 30-40 minutes of their teaching and instructional interactions with students.
6. Retrieved and reviewed the QTQS self-reflection checklist from the QTQS Blackboard site.

7. Reviewed the recording and reflected upon their instruction using the QTQS Self-Reflection Checklist.
8. Submitted their video recording, completed Self-Reflection Checklist, and related documents to the Blackboard Digital Drop Box.
9. Mentors provided feedback on reviewed instruction.

Mentoring

The project mentor teachers also reviewed the video recording with the checklist to provide constructive feedback. Additional consultation and coaching were provided by the mentor during pre- and post-conferences through the electronic mentoring system via Blackboard and Skype. The conferences (face-to-face mentoring) were also conducted bi-monthly during QTQS workshops for approximately 30 minutes to discuss details regarding the Video Reflection activity and other issues mentee teachers may have.

Evaluation of Electronic Mentoring System

As part of evaluation of the program, survey data on using Blackboard and Skype as mentoring tools were collected at the end of each academic year. Thirteen beginning teachers and four mentor teachers participated in the data collection.

Survey Instrument

The survey consists of four open-ended questions designed to generate thoughts and perceptions on the QTQS electronic mentoring: 1.) their experiences of using Blackboard and Skype as they did the VSRI activity, 2.) pros and cons of using Blackboard in relation to the VSRI activity, 3.) advantages and disadvantages of using Skype in relation to the VSRI activity, and 4.) evaluation of the QTQS electronic mentoring activities.

Data Analysis

Responses to four questions were analyzed separately, yet in a similar manner, using the recommendations of Bogdan and Biklen (2003). Two researchers developed a coding system and any disagreements were resolved through discussion. Analysis was completed when agreement was reached by two investigators.

Summary of Findings

The data analysis indicated that Blackboard and Skype online mentoring reduced the time constraints of face-to-face mentoring, allowing teachers to communicate and receive constructive feedback at times that best suit them (Dempsey, Arthur-Kelly, & Carty, 2009). However, the study also revealed some limitations to using the Blackboard system. One common issue was the extended time it took to convert mentee video recordings into a format compatible with the Blackboard Digital Drop Box. The project also found that using only Blackboard tools lacked some of the obvious benefits of face-to-face mentoring (“My mentor and I found it difficult to find time to communicate. We tried to meet before at the mentor’s classroom and it took some planning to arrange such a meeting. We tried via e-mail . . . but it felt very impersonal.”).

In order to address such limitations the project provided additional options of mailing materials, providing various support and training, and adopting Skype as supplementary mentoring tool since Fall 2009. The project found the following advantages of using the Skype program: 1.) Participants felt Skype made it easier to communicate without the inconvenience of having to drive to meet face to face (“Skype allowed for the mentor and mentee relationship to be just that . . . Skype gave us the opportunity to communicate face to face during a time that met both of our schedule needs.”); and 2.) Skype allowed for the mentor and mentee to be more personal and intimate as well as more efficient to carrying out a task (“You are able to see facial expressions and gestures, which helps communication be more efficient. As we looked through our paperwork, we could use other technology at the same time to pull up whatever we needed to on the computer to discuss the video reflection activity.”).

Regarding the evaluation of the QTQS electronic mentoring activities, beginning teachers felt the QTQS mentoring activities were beneficial to a new teachers’ instruction (“Unlike the credential TPA’s, this is a real chance for a new teacher to watch with a critical lens. Most of the time new teachers get feedback based on what they are told to do. With this activity (VSRI), it is the closest thing to what takes place in the classroom every day.”). Participants addressed an important feature of effective mentoring such as non-judgmental teacher support (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Evertson & Smithey, 2000) (“It also helps to have a conversation about your teaching with someone that you are close to that is a supporter and not an evaluator.”).

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