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Abstract

We live in an era of learning convergence in which both the digital and the physical play critical roles (Leander & Hollett, 2013). In these hybrid spaces, boundaries are permeable and students are simultaneously involved in many settings; communications and other forms of digital and physical production alternate between the virtual and the physical rather than residing in one. This means that teaching and learning must address the issue of learning convergence. Meanwhile, research indicates that preparing prospective teachers to be proficient in digital technologies in order to use them to meet the needs of 21st-century learners continues to be a challenge in many teacher education programs (Bakir, 2015; Lei, 2009). A major factor is teacher educators' lack of or limited technology use. Although many factors affect teacher educators' technology use, the most significant hindrance is their attitudes and pedagogical beliefs (Bakir, 2015). If teacher educators do not model technology use, prospective teachers would not observe systematic authentic technology integration, which in turn will affect their classroom practice. One of the major ways to model technology use is through the blended course design.

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The blended course design: The role of agency in a pedagogical shift

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We live in an era of learning convergence in which both the digital and the physical play critical roles (Leander & Hollett, 2013). In these hybrid spaces, boundaries are permeable and students are simultaneously involved in many settings; communications and other forms of digital and physical production alternate between the virtual and the physical rather than residing in one. This means that teaching and learning must address the issue of learning convergence. Meanwhile, research indicates that preparing prospective teachers to be proficient in digital technologies in order to use them to meet the needs of 21st-century learners continues to be a challenge in many teacher education programs (Bakir, 2015; Lei, 2009). A major factor is teacher educators' lack of or limited technology use. Although many factors affect teacher educators' technology use, the most significant hindrance is their attitudes and pedagogical beliefs (Bakir, 2015). If teacher educators do not model technology use, prospective teachers would not observe systematic authentic technology integration, which in turn will affect their classroom practice. One of the major ways to model technology use is through the blended course design.

The blended course design

As technology becomes more ubiquitous, it is imperative that colleges and universities adapt to the needs of students by using various media and technological tools (Dukes, Koorland & Scott, 2012). The growing use of online learning, whether web-enhanced, hybrid or fully online, has been driven in part by the desire to reach populations that are historically underserved by traditional college programs. With increased diversity, competition from other colleges and universities, changes in the preferred instructional techniques by the Millennials etc., it has become imperative to develop alternatives to the traditional course delivery mode.

The blended course design has received increased attention from researchers (Helms, 2014; Pelfrey & Bubolz, 2014; Sullivan & Freishtat, 2013). A blended course is one where some student-

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student interactions and student-teacher interactions are conducted in both a face-to-face and an online classroom (Dukes, Koorland & Scott, 2012). The blended course design provides a third space or a bridge between fully online and face-to-face learning (Helms, 2014; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Ikpeze, 2015). The blended design combines what works best from both the traditional and online delivery methods and fosters learner-centered constructivist learning because it positions students as co-constructors of knowledge through collaborative, active, and problem-based learning (Abdullahi, 2011; Sullivan & Freishtat, 2013). The hybrid course design allows teacher educators to model how best to structure learning activities online as well as inside the classroom. This course design demands that educators develop a critical disposition toward technology and design innovative strategies (Otero, Peressini, Meymaris, & Ford, 2005). This implies the ability to develop an understanding of why, when and how to use the different modes of delivery effectively for instruction as well as model and deliver technology-infused curricula, pedagogy and assessment by helping teacher candidates develop technological, pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). TPACK is the “development of subject matter with the development of technology and of the knowledge of teaching and learning” (Mishra & Koehler, 2006, p. 18). It recognizes that the integration of technology should not be done in a generic sense, but should be situated within authentic contexts, to enable prospective teachers to learn content-specific ways to use technology. While the blended course design has become increasingly popular (Helms, 2014), not much is known about teacher educators’ agency as they negotiate this course delivery format. A teacher educator’s agency may be critical in implementing the blended course design because teachers affect instructional conditions in positive ways when they are positioned as agents.

Conceptual framework

The sociocultural approach provided a framework for this study. Sociocultural perspectives posit that human actions are always shaped by cultural, historical and social structures (Lasky, 2005; Wertsch, 1991; Vygotsky, 1962). Individual actions are thus always afforded and constrained by the social context and influenced by mediational tools. The emphasis is on cultural aspects of human development, the social context and the cultural tools that shape the development of human understanding (Vygotsky, 1962). What individuals believe and how individuals think and act are always shaped by cultural, historical, and social structures that are reflected in mediational tools such as media, language and technology etc. (Wertsch, 1991). A sociocultural approach to agency necessitates examining individual action in such a way that priority is given to the social contexts and cultural tools that shape the development of human beliefs, values, and ways of acting (Wertsch, 1991). Within this perspective, professional agency refers to the capacity to meaningfully construct and display professional identity within socially defined contexts (Hökkä, Eteläpelto & Rasku-Puttonen, 2012; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). This involves the ability to do things in respect of the individual’s own intentions, but still within the operative social and contextual constraints. Agency can also enable people to actively resist certain behaviors, practices or positionings, sometimes leading to oppositional stances and behaviors leading to other identities (Duff, 2012). Lasky (2005) argues that agency is “mediated by the interaction between the individual (attributes and inclinations) and the tools and structures of a social setting” (p. 900). According to this view of agency, “human beings are neither independent nor autonomous agents nor are they shaped and controlled entirely by external influences” (Ray, 2009, p. 116). It is therefore possible to see the same individual exercising more agency in one context and less in another. Agency may therefore be critical in teacher educators’ technology use.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to highlight a teacher educator’s agency while making a pedagogical shift to the blended course design. The following questions were explored: what mediational systems (e.g. technology, policies, institutional norms, cultural tools etc.) influenced the development of one teacher educator’s agency with regard to the blended course design? How did agency impact a pedagogical shift to a blended course design?

Methods

Study context:

This study is situated within the context of a teacher education program in a liberal arts college in northeastern U.S.A. Although the School of Education encourages technology use among teacher educators, the ultimate decision as to whether technology was incorporated and how, depended on individual faculty members.

Data from this study were collected from one teacher educator and prospective teachers who utilized the blended course design in two literacy courses. The study utilized self-study as a methodology. Self-study helps researchers seek to understand their practice settings through systematic observation and data collection, and through thoughtfully considering their own backgrounds and contributions to the setting (Berry, 2008; LaBoskey, 2004). The study employed multiple methods, was self-initiated, improvement aimed and exemplar based (LaBoskey, 2004).

Data were collected in the spring of 2014. The participants were 26 pre-service teachers and 24 graduate teacher education students who took two literacy courses in the spring of 2014. Students met face-to-face and online throughout the semester. The two courses used for this study had nine face-to-face sessions each, three fully online classes, and two flipped classroom sessions (with lecture-capture and Vodcast). Other digital tools used included the student response system (clickers) for assessment, Google Docs for collaborative learning, and other online tools etc. Assignments consisted of long-term inquiry-based projects, short weekly reflections, and several writing-to-learn activities. Online discussions, videos and blogging were used to supplement face-to-face learning.

Data sources

Data sources included my reflective journal where I wrote and analyzed commentaries about my teaching and students' learning. Another major source of data was a 23-item survey (Likert Scale) that measured students' perspectives of the online portion of the blended course design. The survey consisted of four sections: students' perceptions of the course design and content, interaction, assessment and general perceptions. Other sources of data included students' course reflections, individual /focus group interviews, course documents including course syllabi and other students' artifacts.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for the survey data, while content analysis and analytic induction methods as well as constant comparative methods (Bogan, & Biklen, 1998) were used to analyze the archived online discussion transcripts, reflections and the interviews. Content analysis involves making inferences from texts and interpreting such inferences within the context of the text (Hoffman, Wilson, Matinez & Sailors, 2011). The transcribed interviews, students' reflections and archived blog data were first read thoroughly to understand the perspectives that they represent.

Finally, I utilized a cross-case analysis in that patterns were searched for and analyzed both within and across data—e.g. data for undergraduate students were first compared to that of graduate students before combining them for further analysis. These were also compared to other data sources in order to deduce themes. Triangulation of data sources enabled me to increase the trustworthiness of the study. The analytic process is not so much sequential as iterative, although systematic in the sense that it involves careful sorting to ensure that all the data sources were considered. In generating the themes, I looked at my prior teaching methods and use of technology, influences on my pedagogy and my agentic actions.

Outcomes

The analysis of data indicated that several meditational systems influenced my professional identity and agency. These included prior training, beliefs and identity, incremental experimentation, students' perspectives and engaging in self-study research.

Teacher-educator identity and beliefs

Among the factors that affect effective technology integration in teacher education, teacher educators' attitudes and pedagogical beliefs were identified as the most influential (Bakir, 2015). My educational background and prior training as an instructional technologist led to a strong belief in the efficacy of technology use. My identity as a progressive educator in the area of digital literacies means that I view the use of the blended course design as very essential in preparing teachers for technology use. This prior training created a sense of urgency and commitment to use various technologies for instruction and to model technology-infused pedagogy. I believe that teacher educators in the 21st century must be able to model the use of various digital tools for teacher candidates. Teacher candidates must demonstrate the skills needed to use various technological tools for instruction and demonstrate competence in technological literacy to enable them effectively teach children in the 21st century and be competitive in the labor market that is continuously shrinking. I also believe that my participation in blended learning provided a hands-on experience and a model for teacher candidates to integrate technology in their own classrooms.

My belief that the blended course design was culturally responsive also spurred agentic actions. Data from this study corroborated this observation. Prospective teachers in this study had very positive perception of the blended course design because it aligned with their identities as Millennials—technologically savvy generation, and their ways of knowing, learning and communicating. Many of them believed that engaging with digital literacies was important because it would enable them teach a technologically savvy population. Besides, some argued that digital literacies and online interaction are the norm in our present society, and teacher candidates should have the opportunity for hands-on involvement with learning and teaching with these technologies. My actions could be attributed to several factors that include my beliefs, identities, prior training, motivation and an opportunity for choice.

Resource availability

Technology is one of the meditational systems that can support agency. My agentic positioning as a tech savvy educator was made possible by both administrative and quality technical support. I benefitted from the availability of a rich technological infrastructure that enabled me to implement the blended course design. The lecture capture equipment located in my office enabled me to prepare lectures and send to students to prepare them for online discussion and for the flipped classroom sessions. In addition, there was a strong technology support personnel that ensured that whatever I needed to implement the blended course design was given to me. This boosted by agentic feeling.

Adapting practice through incremental experimentation

The shift to the blended course design was orchestrated through years of adapting practice through experimenting with web-based learning and other digital technologies. My initial integration efforts included using such tools as blogs and wikis for discussion while the class also met in face-to-face learning. I also designed some technology projects that were mostly theoretical in nature. Looking back at my initial technology integration effort, I realized that it was flawed. Hands-on activities were not emphasized, and students did not teach with these technologies but rather talked about them. It was clear however that a hands-on, problem-based approach would better prepare candidates to use technology and equip them with the necessary skills and confidence needed to integrate technology in their own classrooms. Research indicates that teacher educators trying to integrate technology need to develop a critical disposition toward technology (Otero, Peressini, Meymaris & Ford, 2005). This implies that teacher educators should be able to develop an understanding of why, when and how to use technology for learning and the ability to model and deliver technology-infused curricula, pedagogy and assessment. It was this realization that enabled me to reassess my integration efforts and to use technology as cognitive, management and motivational tools. This shift in the way I conceived technology integration impacted my later technology integration effort so that the use of tools such as the interactive white board, individual blogs, wikis, glogs, student response system (clickers), electronic book project (eBook) was done with careful attention to integrating content, pedagogy and technology. Through incremental integration of technology and reflecting on my action, I worked to transform my knowledge,

skills, and pedagogy as well as my students' competencies in using technology for instruction. Experimentation gave me some confidence to implement the blended course design because I had evidence to believe that it was more responsive to students' needs. I used students' reflections on their use of various technologies to ascertain their readiness for the blended course design.

The role of students' perspectives

Student's perceptions about the blended course design provided an impetus for my agentic actions. A survey of the 50 students involved in this study showed a strong preference for the blended course design. Given the choice of a complete face-to-face instruction, a blended course and a fully online learning, 93% of the students chose the blended course design. The students cited flexibility, convenience, engagement with online discussions, and the opportunity to interact with classmates in another medium as motivating factors. In all aspects of the survey e.g. content and design, level of interactivity, opportunity for assessment and their overall perceptions, students overwhelmingly showed a preference for the blended course design.

All sources of data indicated that the prospective teachers viewed the blended course design as culturally responsive. It aligned with their learning styles and ways of being and communicating. Feedback from students' interviews and survey indicated that my participation in online discussions and immediate feedback to their discussions increased their interest and satisfaction with this pedagogy. An excerpt from students' reflection on online discussion (Ikpeze, 2015) showed this:

I am in favor of a blended course because it provides a new way to learn. I liked being able to view the questions for online discussions ahead of time and think about them before responding. I liked reading the comments of my classmates online because I could look back at their ideas and learn from them. Sometimes during class discussion, I hear so many great things, but I struggle to remember those ideas later. I have never taken an online class, but this course gives you a taste of what an online course might be like. I am glad that we have the face-to-face aspect of this blended class however, because I like to form relationships with people and I learn best from a professor when I can hear them explain the course content in person.

As can be seen from this excerpt, this student was in favor of the blended course because of its unique advantages, one of which was the ability to interact with her peers while discussing course readings. Other students noted that they were able to reflect on what they learned by rereading the discussions days after they were completed. Students also cited their ability to partly assess their performance online by reading and comparing with other students' entries. Interestingly, most of them indicated that they also liked the face-to-face meeting because they believed it complemented online learning in unique ways. Altogether, the students' perspectives and satisfaction with the blended course became a source of agency because it was an added motivation and confidence booster for blended learning.

Self-study as a catalyst for both experimentation and agentic positioning

Self-study is a moral commitment to improving practice. Self-study as a methodological tool helps to interrogate the pedagogy of teacher education because it challenges, provokes, and illuminates our thinking about teaching and learning. With self-study, I was involved in making epistemological, pedagogical, and ontological decisions to better understand myself in relation to the practices that mediate my teaching. My transition to the blended course design reflected total ownership and unrestricted possibilities for my professional practice. Going through the iterative process of inquiry, reflection, and refinement and negotiating existing constraints within my courses to create conditions necessary for technology integration was very insightful. Refining my course objectives, methods and materials were instrumental to continuous improvement and the evolution of my practice over time. Besides, experimenting with a new practice necessitated a self-study of my transition into a new role as an online educator, and a better understanding of my teacher-researcher identity.

Discussion

Sosa and Gomez (2012) argue that teachers' effectiveness is rooted in the agentic nature of their

responsibilities. A sense of agency enables teacher educators to imagine, take up and perform new roles or identities and to take concrete actions in pursuit of their goals. My sense of agency facilitated my implementation of the blended course design even when there was no clear policy and no formal training on this delivery format. My belief that the blended course design was culturally responsive and would serve as a model for prospective teachers spurred my pedagogical shift. Analysis of data revealed that agency was mediated by professional identity. My prior training as an educational technologist gave me some confidence and supported my belief about the need for teacher educators to use various delivery modes in teaching in order to enhance the learning of teacher candidates in the area of technology use. My identity as a progressive educator who works to produce teachers who can teach 21st century skills, which include knowledge of, and integration of digital literacies also spurred agentic action. My belief that my core purpose as a teacher educator was to help teacher candidates teach with various tools including digital tools also helped. Engaging in self-study of my use of the blended course design was insightful because it enabled me to systematically learn about effective ways to organize blended learning.

The outcome of this study showed that agency arises from complex dynamics that include beliefs, institutional norms and resources, training, the opportunity for experimentation, student voices and engaging in self-study. These mediational systems influenced my choices and actions that gave rise to a pedagogical shift. As Lasky (2005) rightly pointed out, individuals are neither autonomous agents acting entirely on their own nor are they entirely controlled by institutional or other external forces. My agency was mediated by the interaction between my inclinations toward online learning and the structures of my social setting.

Implications

The study suggests that for teacher educators to implement the blended course delivery, they need more than institutional support or access to technological resources; such a shift requires agentic actions rooted in experiences about the benefits of using online/blended courses for teaching and learning. To facilitate a pedagogical shift toward online/blended learning, teacher educators need the opportunity for experimentation, institutional support and encouragement in order to feel confident in the area of blended teaching and learning. It is also critically important to listen to student voices and understand their perspectives. A teacher educator's agency may be stymied if students do not believe that a particular mode of course delivery is good for them or will help achieve their learning goals.

The study also suggests the need for convergent learning, which combines learning in the virtual and physical spaces. Gone are the days when the only form of course delivery was face-to-face learning. With daily activities and learning happening online and in face-to-face, teacher educators should ensure that teacher candidates experience these hybrid spaces in their course delivery by implementing the blended course design.

In addition, there is a need to promote agency because teachers' effectiveness is rooted in the agentic nature of their responsibilities (Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Lasky, 2005; Sosa & Gomez, 2012). Agency can be facilitated if educators are provided with the necessary resources that constitute part of the mediational systems that support agency, such as institutional and technological support, training in the use of various technologies, opportunity for experimentation, among others. It is also important for educators to engage in self-study of their practice in order to monitor their own and their students' learning and improvement especially as it pertains to the blended course design.

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