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Creating Opportunities for Authentic Learning in a Distance Education Course for Middle Level Educators

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Distance education offers tremendous opportunities for learners in higher education, including broad accessibility and flexibility (Ludlow, 1994). However, distance learning arrangements also present certain challenges for instructors, notably the lack of face-to-face contact that learners in traditional class settings enjoy.

I offered the course "The Middle Level School Today" via distance education to teachers and graduate students throughout South Carolina. The course focused on aspects of middle level organization, curriculum, and instruction as articulated in *This We Believe*, *Turning Points 2000*, and other literature grounded in middle level philosophy. One of my stated goals for the course was "To provide opportunities for course participants to engage in dialogue and collaborative work with other professional middle level educators." I wanted each participant to engaging in rich discussion and debate about curricular issues, and to experience the dynamics of working collaboratively as a member of a team of professional middle level educators. In short, I wanted to create authentic learning opportunities for participants in my course and, by doing so, to model the principles of "authentic achievement" so that they could implement them in their own classrooms (Newmann & Associates, 1996).

In this 'Best Practices" presentation I discuss the challenges of creating opportunities for authentic learning in courses offered at a distance; I describe the process of implementing authentic instruction in the middle level education course; and I share feedback received from the participants in the course.

In addition to teaching an extensive array of pedagogical and curricular content knowledge and skills, courses in middle level teacher preparation programs "must be intentionally designed to help (students) learn the discrete skills of collaboration, interpersonal negotiation, and teamwork" (Bishop & Allen-Malley, 2004, p. 92). While traditional classroom environments may be structured to provide optimal development of these skills, there is an increasing need to provide teachers with high quality middle level coursework in flexible, distance learning formats that may not allow for immediate personal interaction. In this paper I will describe an authentic learning experience developed and implemented in a graduate-level distance education course called "The Middle Level School Today," which was delivered through

a combination of online, live interactive TV, and on-campus meetings.

Authentic Learning in MiddleLevel Teacher Education

Drawing on the work of Newmann and others (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995; Newmann & Associates, 1996; Wehlage et al., 1996), the authors of *Turning Points 2000* recommend the development and implementation of authentic learning experiences in middle school classrooms. Such experiences include the following three elements.

1. *Construction of knowledge:* Students should construct or produce knowledge, instead of just reproducing or identifying understandings that others have created.
2. *Disciplined inquiry:* Students should engage in cognitive work that requires them to rely on a field of knowledge, search for understanding, and communicate, in "elaborate forms," their ideas and findings.
3. *Value beyond school:* Students' accomplishments should have value—either aesthetic, utilitarian, or personal—beyond just documenting their competence. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 69)

I believe that teacher educators should strive to model the pedagogies, assessment strategies, and reflective teaching practices that we advocate in our courses. Consistent with this philosophy of teacher education, I planned my course around an integrated curriculum project that would not only help my students to understand and apply strategies for curriculum integration advocated in the course texts, but also allow them to experience the complex process of curriculum integration which includes backward design, collaborative planning, shared decision making, and many other aspects of team dynamics. My goal was to create an *authentic learning experience* through which my students could demonstrate several of the NMSA teacher preparation standards related to interdisciplinary planning and teaming. These standards are listed in Figure 1.

TheIntegrated Curriculum Project

Central to the course plan for "The Middle Level School Today" was a team project in which participants would develop an interdisciplinary instructional unit. I originally intended for interdisciplinary teams of teachers from the same school, district, or region to form teams for this project. However, the course enrollment only reached five. As a result, I proposed that the class work together as a single team to develop a unit. The course participants included an itinerant strings teacher, an assistant principal, a newly hired math teacher, and two graduate students from the program in secondary English. I served as the social studies specialist on the team.

The backward design process was both a key learning goal for my students and the organizing framework for the project. Jackson and Davis (2000) summarize the backward design process as follows.

> In backward design, educators start with the academic standards that define what students should know and be able to do, then decide on the assessments that will allow students to demonstrate their mastery of the knowledge and skills, and finally develop the instructional experiences that will prepare students to show what they have learned. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 40)

The outcome for the project was derived from the NMSA Master's Level Teacher Preparation Standards listed in Figure 1, and was stated as a learning objective: "Course participants will collaborate with other teachers to plan an interdisciplinary unit based on the principles of effective middle level curriculum, instruction, and assessment as described in *Turning Points 2000*." I planned to use two tools to assess the achievement of this objective; the interdisciplinary

unit plan, and the written reflections produced by the students after completing the project.

A series of planned learning experiences supported the class as we worked toward completing the project. During an on-campus meeting we completed NMSA *Professional Development Kit #3*, Module 3: "Focusing on Curriculum and Instruction" (Schurr & Lounsbury, 2001). This module helped the class arrive at some common understandings of curriculum integration and associated concepts. During all of our on-campus and live satellite TV sessions we discussed ideas in the middle level literature that focused on curriculum planning, including sections of *Turning Points* 2000 and *This We Believe*. These discussions sometimes continued online via our Blackboard discussion board. Finally, we completed several activities that complemented the *Effective Middle Schools in Action* video series. These videos were extremely valuable, as they enabled us to actually see middle level principles in practice.

The project met all three criteria for authentic learning. First, my students *constructed their own knowledge* about curriculum integration and teaming. Second, my students engaged in *disciplined inquiry*, as they applied content knowledge in their respective disciplines as well as their emerging knowledge of middle level curriculum and pedagogy. Finally, the finished product had *value to the students beyond school*. As in-service and pre-service teachers, each participant would eventually have the opportunity to implement the interdisciplinary unit we created or selected aspects of it.

Implementing Authentic Instruction at a Distance

"The Middle Level School Today" was a blended or hybrid distance course delivered through a combination of online, live interactive TV, and two traditional, on-campus meetings. This format presented certain challenges as I tried to create an authentic interdisciplinary planning experience. I wanted to create a forum for discourse that would allow students to experience the spontaneity and interpersonal dynamics of team planning, however the distance format did not allow for a high level of immediacy and interpersonal contact.

We determined the thematic focus for our unit during an on-campus meeting at the beginning of the course. We agreed to develop an interdisciplinary unit on symbolism using the film *Star Wars* as a major focal point. While we enjoyed the benefits of live, face-to-face interaction during the initial brainstorming session, subsequent discussion of the unit focus occurred asynchronously online.

The online discussions were an important part of the planning process. Because the discussions occurred asynchronously, participants could take time to think carefully about their postings and their responses to each other's postings. This level of thoughtfulness was evident in the following exchange that took place as we were developing an essential question or big idea for our unit.

Student 1: I've been thinking about the 'big idea' but am kind of drawing a blank. The political implications of the movie in terms of world wide conflict and the struggle between good and evil keep resurfacing in my mind (no wonder why...isn't that what the movie is about!!! duh.) Are we to consider the symbols in star wars as they pertain to good and evil, i.e., do they suggest that there is a moral imperative for good over evil? Maybe a humanitarian basis for such a choice? Symbols...good and evil...choices...reasons... help somebody out there!

Student 2: I agree, this is a challenge! So - our topic is symbolism, and the outcome is what I want my students to get about 'symbolism' in mathematics, right? I'm thinking - Algebra IS symbolic, we use symbols to represent members of a set and draw generalizations about those members - and outside of algebra mathematics uses a variety of symbols to represent actions or ideas, as well. An overall goal of mine is that I want students to use symbolic reasoning to represent mathematical situations - which is straight out of the Algebra

I course description, btw, although it applies to a lesser degree to a pre-Algebra course as well. Do I have the right idea? Or do I need to be more specific? And as far as I can apply this specifically to Star Wars, I'm pretty stumped. I've read and reread my standards. Does anyone have any ideas? Instructor: I think you hit on the central idea - recognizing symbolism, interpreting symbolism, etc. Can we frame this as an essential question for students to answer? In her post (Student 2) did a good job of identifying how people use symbols and representation in mathematics. I think that's precisely the kind of conceptual connection that needs to be made across disciplines.

We'll discuss more tomorrow a.m.

It is also very important to note that students felt comfortable extending their thinking and taking some intellectual risks online. For instance, Student 1 called for "help somebody out there!" while Student 2 replied with a supportive, "I agree, this is a challenge!" This level of support was present throughout our online planning.

Another feature of our online discussions was peer teaching. Participants in the discussions helped each other clarify ideas, learn new concepts, and develop new understandings. Some of these aspects were evident in the following exchange, as Student 3 helped Student 1 understand the idea of "jigsaw."

Student 3: So, I think that using (Student 4's) idea about watching the film and having the students collect examples of ten symbols throughout the film then discussing them in small groups is a good idea. Then we can use (Instructor's) idea about using jigsaw to spread ideas to new groups and within these new groups the students can create their own symbols (also using Student 2's idea about the type of music, etc. that would represent them) and have them present them in their new groups. Sound like a plan?

Student 1: First..did I miss something? What is jigsaw? Next, while I think that an important part of the "lesson" is for students to pick symbols out of the movie and discuss, I feel that some kind of pre-viewing session about symbols might be necessary. What do our students know about them? Can they understand that in some instances a symbol has only one meaning, such as a plus sign in a mathematical context, and that in other contexts this same symbol has many other meanings? Also, sometimes symbols are not even seen as such, thus not comprehended. What I am getting at is that our assessment should be based on them (students) utilizing some of the cognitive functions in "symbolic" theory, which necessitites a discovery of some of the nuances....or is that what has already been said?

Student 3: First, jigsaw is just a group format that takes one person from each group when discussion is finished and moves that person to another group. That person then shares with the new group the information discussed in the previous group so that ideas are spread more widely.

Also I agree that there needs to be more background work done. I do think that the students should get instruction in the days prior to the film from the various disciplines discussing symbols and the ways that they function in various subject areas.

But are you thinking that there should be more assessment after the film?

I found the online discussions to be a very valuable forum for planning and learning together. In my traditional classes, I had often used online discussion to extend or support learning that occurred in the classroom. In "The Middle Level School Today," the reverse was true. Most of our original ideas were generated online, and the messy work of clarifying misunderstandings and resolving differences occurred in our "virtual teacher's lounge."

Conclusion

The collaborative, interdisciplinary nature of work in middle school teaching teams calls for middle level courses that offer in-service and pre-service teachers authentic collaborative, interdisciplinary learning experiences. As Meyer and Boyle (2005) asked,

> Is it possible to communicate the rich and value-laden middle school concept to pre-service teachers through an online learning experience? Can teachers learn the concepts and skills necessary to implement an effective middle school program through computer-based instruction? (p. 11)

While courses offered in flexible, distance education formats may present some obstacles to immediate interpersonal communication and collaborative work, there are ways for middle level teacher educators to enhance the authenticity of distance learning experiences. My experience, particularly with the online discussion, suggested that a distance learning environment can provide opportunities for rich learning experiences, thoughtful communication, and collaborative planning and decision-making.

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Figure 1. NMSA Master's Level Teacher Preparation Standards Related to Interdisciplinary planning and Teaming

Standard 2. Middle Level Philosophy and School Organization **Middle level masters candidates understand and analyze the major concepts, principles, theories, and research underlying the philosophical foundations and organizational components of highly effective middle level schools, and they apply that knowledge in their practice.**

Knowledge ·Understand that the team process is the most effective strategy for school improvement and student learning.

Performances ·Incorporate developmentally responsive organizational components of teaming and flexible instructional time, and work successfully within them to maximize student learning.

Standard 5. Middle Level Instruction and Assessment **Middle level masters candidates understand and analyze the major concepts, principles, theories, and research related to effective middle level instruction and assessment, and they apply a variety of effective strategies to meet the varying abilities, interests, and learning styles of all young adolescents.**

Dispositions ·Value opportunities to plan instruction collaboratively with teammates and other colleagues.

Performances ·Plan and implement effective instruction and assessment individually and with colleagues.

Standard 7. Middle Level Professional Roles **Middle level masters candidates understand and analyze the major concepts, principles, theories, and research related to their professional roles in middle level education, and they apply that knowledge in their practice.**

Knowledge ·Have a comprehensive understanding of teaming/collaborative theories and processes.

Performances ·Work successfully as members of interdisciplinary teams.
·Serve as advisors and mentors for prospective and practicing teachers.

**Adapted from http://www.nmsa.org*