Galloping Along the Front Range:
Mentoring a Virtual K-12 School Teacher-in-Residence

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Abstract: With the impending teacher shortage, the current emphasis on alternative licensing for teachers, and the growth of online virtual schools, how can educators be sure that virtual teachers are prepared for this new environment? Mentoring is a current strategy utilized to aid the development of classroom teachers, and is being utilized to assist a virtual teacher to meet standards needed for certification. This paper describes how the mentoring process is being adapted to meet the needs of the virtual teacher while satisfying state teacher education standards.

Galloping along the Front Range

Along with the plentitude of horses in Southeastern Colorado, a new type of school is galloping through the school systems. According to the national Center on Education Policy (Fulton, 2002) in 2001/2002 between 40-50,000 K-12 students were enrolled in an online course. In the 2002/2003 school year over 100 virtual schools were in operation. In addition, about a quarter of national education leaders surveyed believed that one out of every five of their students will receive a "substantial portion" of their education over the internet in the next three years(Fulton, 2002). Proof of these statistics can be seen in Colorado, known as a 'Front Range' state at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, as four substantial online virtual schools exist with a constantly increasing enrollment.

Due to the many remote locations of schools in Colorado, concern for the teacher shortage encouraged the Teacher Education staff at the Colorado State University- Pueblo to apply for a grant to aid in placing alternative teachers in the classrooms. The Southern Colorado Teacher In Residence Program (SCTIRP) grant supplies support and training for teachers hired by local districts with bachelor degrees but not teacher licensure. Collaboration occurs between the University and several local education districts. The new teachers are given a provisional license with the agreement that they need to meet strict competencies, including taking the local competency tests, and courses geared to aid their transition into teaching. Part of their program includes working with a mentor for two years, and creating a portfolio of their work demonstrating the necessary competencies. One candidate teaching in a virtual school, decided to take advantage of the program. But how can the mentoring and adherence to competencies usually measured in a face-to-face environment take place in a virtual environment? This paper explores those challenges, offers an example of solutions attempted, and shares the lessons learned.

Mentoring Process in a Teacher Education Program

Teacher-in-Residency (TIR) candidates begin with a classroom management seminar in August and one weekly evening course each semester, with more classes in the summer. During classes, candidates are informed of competencies that need to be met before finishing the two-year program. These competencies include passing state

tests in their field of expertise, as well as literacy and teaching strategies. In addition, candidates need to show competency in eight goal areas set by the state. These include such items as classroom management, literacy, professionalism, creating standards based lessons, assessment, & technology. Mentors visit the candidates' classrooms each week for approximately two hours while cooperating with the building principal.   As mentors observe candidates in the classroom, they record levels of proficiencies in each of the standards and benchmarks that candidates meet as they teach in the classroom. As part of the program, candidates create an online portfolio with artifacts showing how they met the eight goals. In addition, candidates complete a reflection paper on each of the goals. Evaluation of all the goals met throughout the semester occurs at both midterm and final.

Description of the online K-12 Virtual Teaching Environment
One candidate teaches in the Colorado Virtual Academy (COVA). A commercial company (K12.com) administers this virtual school, although it is considered a charter school, and the Adams12 School District employs the teachers. Students, teachers and administrators follow the same standards and guidelines as public schools. Funding for students comes out of the state per pupil expenditure. Enrollment in COVA the first year (Fall 2001) was approximately 400 students. The 2003/2004 school year is the third year in operation, and attendance is near 1700 students in the state of Colorado alone, making the Academy the largest elementary school in the state. This enrollment includes 8.5% special education students.

The supply of a computer and Internet access for students in the home comes from Federal and state funding allocated per pupil. The company sends boxes of teaching supplies to the home for parents to utilize with students as they complete lessons online. Parents teach the lessons with guidance from the teacher in the background. Regular testing of learned concepts occurs online, and results are kept by the database. If a child has difficulty learning a concept, several alternative lessons are offered using different modalities. The pacing of the lessons is individualized, although a suggested pacing is encouraged to help students complete courses by the end of the school year. The teacher has access at all times to the results of each of her online students' progress. Conferences are held every other week between the students, teacher and parents via telephone. In addition, state testing is required of all students, so arrangements are made to meet students in alternative places for testing.   The virtual students may utilize the local schools during their spring break, or a library or bookstore in order to take the required state tests.

Teachers from all K12.com schools attend a "National Training" in Washington D.C. every fall, as well as professional development staff meetings in Denver on a monthly basis. These meetings are utilized to train teachers to administer state and local tests required of all Colorado students.

Adapting the mentoring to the online environment
The supervisor, mentor, TIR, and administrators usually evaluate the eight teacher education goals as they are being met by the Teacher-In-Residence.   The TIR writes reflections on each of the goals, as well as collecting artifacts of activities that demonstrate proficiency on each of the goals put into the online portfolio.

While the mentoring process has been researched and documented for regular teacher education programs (Wojnowski, 2003), adapting it for use with a teacher whose students are distributed throughout the state seems to be a challenging task. How does one "observe" virtual students at work, or a teacher's classroom management? If the teacher cannot be observed working physically with children, how can a mentor recommend that licensure? Due to the unique nature of this environment, new paths needed to be created for this particular TIR. Methods utilized by both the virtual teacher and the mentor to reach a compromise that benefited the teacher, the university, and the virtual students are discussed to demonstrate how the mentor and teacher were able to find ways to evaluate the teacher's progress in each of the eight goal areas.

The eight teacher education goals areas with examples of activities utilized to measure competency in that goal follow:

Goal 1 - Use democratic principles to create communities of learners that assure positive social interactions, collaboration, and cooperation.

To develop an online community of learners the online teacher offered many chances for students to interact with each other. The use of a discussion board in which parents and students can communicate about items other than the

lessons being taught encouraged this community to flourish. In addition, many social and educational field trips were planned including a class picnic visited by an animal rescue organization, visits to museums, and a story hour at the local bookstore. The mentor was on hand for several of these events, thus observing the teacher's interaction with the students, and evaluating this interaction.

Goal 2 - Creates learning experiences that make content knowledge accessible, exciting, and meaningful for all students.

While the curriculum and lessons in the online environment are previously created and monitored by the vendor and it's assessment system, the lessons are taught by the students' parents. Since many parents are not expert teachers, the online teacher provides backup guidance, as well as alternative activities to utilize with special needs students, or students who just need an additional approach to a lesson. The mentor was present while the teacher conducted a phone conference in which the online teacher was discussing alternative methods for a parent to utilize with a child with vision challenges, and also with a parent dealing with students with extremely limited abilities. In another phone conference, the online teacher assisted a parent with a behavioral challenge of a student having difficulty settling down to work.

Goal 3 - Creates a learning community in which individual differences are respected, appreciated, and celebrated.

At a joint story hour held at a local bookstore, students brought their favorite book to share. Each child was invited to sit in the reader's chair, showcasing their new reading abilities, and demonstrating their choices and interests, which were celebrated during ensuing discussions. The children were encouraged to respect and celebrate their individual differences.

Goal 4 –Ensure, through the use of standards and informal and formal assessment activities, the continuous development of all learners.

The phenomenal record keeping created by the online program, allowed the online teacher to have the students' progress at her fingertips. The teacher accessed these scores, and analyzed them on a daily and bi-weekly basis to be able to discuss them with parents at the bi-weekly scheduled phone conferences. In addition, as she checked each child's progress on a daily basis, if the child was struggling the teacher could recommend alternative approaches to the lesson. This communication could be instigated by either the teacher or parent, and may have taken place either by phone or email. In addition, local students' progress was forwarded to the state and national vendor, who investigated and made sure that all curriculum matched the state standards, and adapted the curriculum from suggestions given by both the teachers and parents.

Goal 5 - Constructs and uses pedagogy to maximize the intellectual, social, physical, and moral development of all students.

With the phenomenal record keeping mentioned above, the teacher frequently recommended alternative pedagogical approaches to the parent to help extend the learning of the child. For example, the teacher was observed discussing a family vacation experience with a child during a phone conference, and making connections for the child to the curriculum activities he had accomplished online previously.

In addition, the teacher encouraged parents to initiate playgroup activities, and one parent started a physical education class so that youngsters could become well rounded. Another communication with parents informed them of bowling activities that students could participate in at the local bowling lanes. These activities tied in very nicely with the curricular unit of physical health that some of the students were taking.

Goal 6 - Is a reflective decision maker, incorporating understandings of educational history, philosophy, and inquiry, as well as the values of the democratic ideal.

The nature of communication between parents and the teacher encourages the online teacher to be a reflective decision maker. While working online, the teacher has the answering machine on to receive calls from parents, as well as email utilized as another mode of communication. Parents are informed early in the program that the teacher

will return the phone call or email within 24 hours. This 24-hour turn around time gives the teacher time to reflect on the question, research for appropriate approaches or solutions, and to return with answers in a timely manner.

Goal 7 - *Creates communities of learning by working collaboratively with colleagues, families, and other members.*

The nature of this program hinges on the collaboration between parents and the teacher. The online teacher monitors each child's daily progress, as well as giving parents the feedback on each lesson. The bi-weekly conferences with each child and parent, as well as being able to leave daily phone or email messages, makes this collaboration between colleagues seem extremely easy and timely.

In addition, the communication and sharing of materials between colleagues was evident when the mentor visited a picnic where students who live in a certain area were invited to get together and have a book exchange. The students were under the guidance of several different teachers, but all the teachers attended, and shared materials with each other.   This sharing of materials is also encouraged during the monthly staff meetings in Denver, where teachers receive necessary and timely staff development.

Goal 8 - *Models the professional and ethical responsibilities of the education profession.*

 The teacher was observed conducting the introductory meeting with parents to explain the program, and their part in it. The teacher was appropriately dressed and exhibited good communication skills.   In addition, the teacher modeled professional and ethical responsibilities when dealing with both students and parents at social events, as well as testing students, and story hour at the bookstore.

The teacher models professional responsibility when she presents at national meetings about her successes in the online environment, and mentors her regional teacher colleagues through the everyday challenges of teaching.

Artifacts for each of the goals met above can be seen in the teacher's online portfolio. For access to this portfolio contact jberman@covcs.org.

Reference:

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