

# MAKING THE CASE FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED ENVIRONMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*In one university, shifting to technology-mediated learning environments represents a tension between its traditional, conservative history and its mission to reach out to underserved populations. At this university, the educational leadership department has undertaken two ventures to increase access to two different programs – one for principal certification and one for practicing teachers to obtain a Master’s degree in a cohort model. This article addresses the relational aspects that are important to promoting transformational learning, in addition to the logistic changes to be implemented in these two programs.*

**Keywords:** Transformational Learning, technology-mediated, learning environment

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education is always shifting due to academic mandates, student needs, workforce demands, and technological changes. Conservative and strongly traditional institutions may at times struggle to make the changes that are necessary to keep up with the demands and meet the needs of both faculty and students. Implementing new technologies can provide solutions to academic issues in higher education (Stewart, Harlow, & DeBacco, 2011). On-line and blended programs that “attract more students, especially those from underrepresented populations” and “offer students the flexibility to take courses at centers of higher education without consideration for the physical location” can be advantageous for both the students and the university (Stewart et al. 2011, p. 357).

## THE CONTEXT

The two authors work for a conservative university that prides itself on working with and reaching out to the underserved and underrepresented populations. Our university faces the obstacles of maintaining a traditional legacy while implementing needed changes to remain relevant. Other concerns include the cost of graduate credits, viability, and competition from competing universities. The university is making progress with online and blended learning, but it has been a slow process and there is much more that must be done.

Our department trains educational leaders in several contexts. One of the writers certifies principals from rural contexts within our state. The other writer works with cohorts of practicing teachers from regions, often rural, outside our state. Throughout this paper, we alternate speaking in the first person; one author, talking about the experience of developing an online principal certification program, and the other author talking about instructing and advising Master’s degree candidates.

Regardless of their context for training educational leaders, faculty in the educational leadership program pride themselves on their program’s transformative nature and support the mission of providing quality graduate education to diverse locations. However, incorporating technological innovations has been particularly slow to evolve in our

department due to the belief that on-line or blended learning may not facilitate the same level of professional as well as personal transformation. This transformation has been seen as the result of face-to-face interactions between instructor and student or among students in the cohort...truly, the result of building strong, authentic relationships within the context of rigorous and relevant activities.

Even the two writers represent a range of opinion. The author who created an online principal certification program feels technology is vital to maintaining a viable and relevant institutional presence. It is the belief of this author that we are failing to recognize who are students are and what their learning needs may be. There is a place for both systems of instruction.

The other author was assigned to advise a pilot endeavor in the department – the first ever co-located cohort, consisting of two smaller cohorts in two geographically separate cities. Originally, I was reluctant to embrace the technological connection of a cohort because of a teaching philosophy grounded in constructivist, holistic experiences. But, as I learned about additional technologies which could support our videoconference connection between the two locations, I grew more excited.

The professional literature regarding the increasing use of technology-mediated in higher education is extensive. Young (2002) wrote about the statement made by Pennsylvania State University's president that the single-greatest unrecognized trend in higher education was the convergence of online and traditional instruction. As online environments have increased, student satisfaction has not suffered. Dziuban, Moskal, & Hartman (2005) found that "students rate the quality of their blended experience as high as or higher than their face-to-face courses. They also report high satisfaction with instructor interaction" (p.6). Implementing online courses with the blended approach can be both rigorous and relevant to the learner. Singh (2003) wrote "that the concept of blended learning is not just a one-time event-learning is a continuous process. Blending provides various benefits over using any single learning delivery medium alone" (p. 6). He goes on to state that "research from institutions such as Stanford University and the University of Tennessee have given us valuable insight into mechanisms by which blended learning is better than both traditional methods and individual forms of e-learning technology alone" (p. 8). The University of Tennessee found that blended programs can be completed in half the time and less than half the cost, using a mix of e-learning, self-paced instruction, and physical classroom delivery. More importantly, they found that a well designed program was able to show an overall 10% better learning outcome than the traditional learning format (Singh 2003). Lastly, instructional designers can intentionally use online learning endeavors to promote transformative learning (Veletsianos, 2011). Santo (2005) followed rural educators in an online program and found the following elements of transformative learning: the educators envisioned new possibilities with an increasing sense of confidence as a result of online learning. The issues about relevance, rigor, transformation, and face-to-face instruction should not be overlooked, but can be eliminated through well designed programs that take these concerns into account. Students should be offered an option; many students will seek out programs that are traditional in format, while others will appreciate the flexibility of online environments.

## PROGRAM CHANGES

Blended learning has the potential in our department to prepare educational leaders to support technological innovations and incorporate technology into their instructional leadership. Because of the emphasis for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in curricula, teachers are encouraged to

incorporate technology with critical-thinking training (e.g., Cramer, 2007). Likewise, a need for e-leaders who can convey competent leadership through a technology-medium has been documented (Gurr, 2004). Within our two programs related to educational leadership, two approaches have been used to incorporate blended learning in this traditional department. Our individual stories follow.

### **PRINCIPAL CERTIFICATION**

Previously, the university had a school principal program that was not cost-effective or attractive to possible candidates. It became clear that something new had to be implemented and that thinking outside the traditional box was necessary. Therefore four issues had to be addressed. First the delivery of the program had to be altered. An online module process was created that runs for two consecutive semesters. The candidates work online, but the face-to-face or relationship development connections are made via personal visits, Skype, email, telephone, and teleconferencing. Second, the structure of the program had to meet the needs of practitioners in the field and the state requirements. It was imperative that every piece of information and every assignment and performance task met the needs and realities of current principals in the field. The modules were designed around the ISLLC Standards for School Leaders and incorporated each requirement for state program approvals. Third, cost had to be addressed because candidates could not afford the current graduate credit rates. Prior to the change in program delivery, the incoming candidates were faced with paying the high cost of graduate credit. By turning the focus to providing professional development credit for individuals who already hold a Master's Degree in Education and currently work in the field, the costs were cut in half. Finally, the curriculum had to be relevant, rigorous, and follow sound pedagogy. This was done by first addressing the issue of context: who are the learners? What do they know? What is the level of education? What profession do they represent? What do they need to know before proceeding? Next, knowledge had to be categorized. This was done by looking at three types of knowledge: strategic, procedural, and factual. Third, evidence was identified which involved student thinking or behavior that indicated master of the strategic knowledge competencies. The final area addressed was the pedagogical model. Each model addresses the scope, competencies, experiences, modeling, readings, presentations, coaching, scaffolding, reflection, action, and evaluation measure.

Once the doors began to open and all of the approvals were given, a three-year process to make this change a reality began. Roadblocks had to be addressed throughout the change and comments were addressed, but holding steadfast and committed made the difference. The program went from 1 student, to 7 students, to 13 students, to currently having 16 students in the program and a waiting list for 2013-2014. The numbers may seem small and possibly insignificant, but in reality they were extremely important. With no marketing or advertising and working directly with the candidates that have come via word of mouth it has been an amazing journey. The candidates have come from all over the state. They come to us from a variety of cultural, educational, and socio-economical backgrounds and from rural, hard to reach communities, small towns, and cities. The program has been able to reach out to those that were once reluctant to be part of a principal certification program due to lack of access or family and work restraints.

Beyond the normal changes of program development two goals have been imperative for program success. The first has been transformational learning and the second has been building strong, authentic relationships with the candidates. Transformational learning has been found through the reflection process, discussions, projects, and the impact on both culture and student achievement. We also incorporate professional growth plans that are living, breathing documents and are utilized throughout the internship. The students set their

own goals for learning and focus on areas in which they want to grow professionally. The plan and their desire to grow and learn helps guide the interns/candidates toward professional growth and transformation.

Relationships take time, but are significantly important to both intern and program success. The instructor is purposeful and diligent about providing opportunities for relationship building. This is done through feedback on assignments, discussions via email, Skype, teleconferencing, phone calls, and emails. By providing the one-one-one attention supportive, professional relationships have been developed. By soliciting specific feedback my efforts toward achieving this goal have come to fruition and can be supported by the following types of evidence: "This has been such a valuable experience for me." "Please keep providing the in depth conversations, scenarios, and, experiences." "Keep doing what you have been doing. It has been an amazing experience." "Continue to provide both academic and emotional support." It is statements like those above that provide the evidence that the positive, proactive relationships are occurring.

### **RURAL COHORTS OF PRACTICING TEACHERS**

Traditionally in our program, instructors have traveled to the locations where a cohort of practicing teachers can meet for intensive weekend courses. For each course, the instructor holds class face-to-face with the cohort once a month. The cohort model of graduate instruction has been noted to increase completion rates (e.g., Nimer, 2009) and to create a group of individuals who can support each other even after their graduate work is completed (McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2005). After two years of coursework and completion of additional requirements (e.g., an action research project), each candidate in the cohort graduates from the program.

However, to make the graduate program more accessible to rural locations, the pilot co-located cohort program combines two smaller groups of candidates into one larger cohort. Instructors attend one location and the second location is connected synchronously via videoconference. The instructor alternates between locations, thus maintaining the principles of face-to-face interaction while leveraging technology to support a viable program that is accessible in diverse settings.

Individuals assigned to be the contact in each of the two locations worked with Information Technology (IT) staff to learn the videoconferencing technology. During the first meeting of the cohort, time was allotted to developing a sense of community across the group. One of my primary concerns as an instructor is preventing a sense of competition or hierarchy across the two locations. Feedback from the candidates expressed appreciation for the time invested establishing norms; "The time spent on the first evening setting up the rules and framework in regards to the technology was invaluable."

Additional candidate feedback has addressed several aspects of relationships, such as the different feeling when the instructor is present: "When the instructor is with you...you feel reassured due to their presence" "It is obviously easier to be with the instructor." Additional challenges of interacting as a larger group were also addressed:

"I do think we need to be reminded often of taking turns to speak, as it is natural to start multiple conversations when you feel passionate about a subject!" "I am mindful of the wait time between sites-the need to speak slower." Candidates also mentioned their appreciation for being able to access the program from their physical location: "For me, even if the process is bumpy, it is way better than having to physically travel. Compared to other [video conference] opportunities that I have been a part of, our sessions are working remarkably well."

Candidates in both locations have been invited to provide suggestions for technology tools or applications that could facilitate instruction in our setting. So far, only a few weekend sessions have been held. But Google Docs, Blackboard, and Twitter have been useful. In each site, those with greater comfort with technology have shared their expertise with others (including the instructor)! These have been inspiring sessions. However, more time is needed in this pilot endeavor to determine whether relationships will be established that will facilitate transformational learning for the members of this cohort.

### SIGNIFICANCE AND NEXT STEPS

It is important to recognize that online or blended learning and teaching is not for everyone, but it doesn't mean that it is not as meaningful, rigorous, or professionally fulfilling as the traditional model. Both types of learning and teaching must exist to meet the needs of all learners. In the principal certification program, the decision to change our model was done to reach individuals across the state and deal with important issues. The program is still evolving and changing each year due to feedback and state requirements, as we work to make it more effective. We have been able to provide each candidate a strong foundation in school leadership, a sense of community, relevance in the field, and transformational experiences throughout the program. In the cohort-based Master's program, videoconferencing has provided an opportunity for candidates in rural locations to meet simultaneously. The relationships are in an initial stage of development, so it is too early to determine the resulting level of transformation.

Nevertheless, both these programmatic changes are important steps for a department focused on transformational learning within a conservative, traditional university. Ongoing research needs to be conducted to determine how technology-mediated environments can promote relationships that lead to personal and professional transformation.

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