

**Volume 7      Number 1      2019**

**NATIONAL  
SOCIAL  
SCIENCE  
TECHNOLOGY  
JOURNAL**

**Official Journal of the National Social Science Association**

Name of Publication: **NATIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE TECHNOLOGY JOURNAL**  
Issue: Volume 7 #1

Offices of Publication: National Social Science Association  
Mailing Address  
2020 Hills Lake Drive  
El Cajon, CA 92020

Office Address:  
9131 Fletcher Parkway, Suite 119  
La Mesa, CA 91942

On Line journals: <http://nssa.us>  
E-mail address: [natsocsci@aol.com](mailto:natsocsci@aol.com); [nssal@cox.net](mailto:nssal@cox.net)

The National Social Science Technology Journal is being abstracted in: Cabell's Directory; Eric Clearinghouse; EBSCO, Economic Abstracts; Historical Abstracts; Index to Periodical Articles; Social Science Source; Social Science Index; Sociological Abstracts; the University Reference System.

We wish to thank all authors for the licensing of the articles. And we wish to thank all those who have reviewed these articles for publication



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NATIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE TECHNOLOGY JOURNAL

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## **Building a Supportive Twitter Community for Teacher Education Students**

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New teachers are experiencing higher levels of burnout at a faster rate now than ever before (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). Almost one in five new teachers quit within the first five years (Gray, Taie, & Rear, 2015). Survey results point to work stress as a primary reason for teacher burnout (Aud et al., 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2014). New teachers who leave the profession most frequently cite stress from working conditions including isolation, lack of support, lack of adequate classroom resources, insufficient professional development, little input into decision making, poor leadership, unattainable accountability systems, student misbehavior, and low salaries (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

As increasing demands and pressure are placed upon teachers, Twitter may impact how preservice teachers feel supported before they even officially enter the teaching profession. Previous research shows a positive relationship between social networking and perceived social support, affect, sense of community, and life satisfaction (Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014). Social media use has also been shown to have positive effects on the emotional wellbeing of in-service teachers, especially in combating loneliness and promoting positive relationships (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014).

Although social media use is widespread in everyday life, it has grown rather slowly in higher education (Gülbahar, Rapp, Kilis, & Sitnikova, 2017). While the use of Twitter in higher education holds many potential promises for preservice teachers, studies investigating the impact of Twitter in teacher education programs are limited, despite the need to offer more support to new teachers.

Twitter may support the emotional well-being of preservice teachers by connecting them to classmates, instructors, and other professionals in the field who may provide leadership and help reduce new teachers' feelings of stress. This support may be a factor in reducing new teacher attrition, which is a growing problem (Aud et al., 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2014). Limited research surrounding how Twitter use in teacher education programs impacts preservice teachers' feelings of community and emotional support is presented, and a Twitter guide for leaders in teacher education programs is included.

### **Supportive Twitter Communities in Teacher Education**

Although studies are limited, Twitter use in teacher education programs appears to positively support preservice teachers' emotional needs by strengthening connections to peers, faculty, and other educators as well as offering opportunities for reflection and collaboration, all of which may help reduce feelings of isolation and work stress (Benko et al., 2013; Domizi, 2013; Johnson, 2016; Krutka, 2014; Lin et al., 2013; Lou et al., 2017; Wright, 2010). Early research from Wright (2010) explored how Twitter enabled preservice teachers to develop reflective practices with one another during their student teaching experiences. Participants were required to tweet in response to predetermined prompts, sharing brief reflections upon their daily experiences in the classroom. Participants' accounts were set up to be private from the rest of the cyberspace area of Twitter; the study was not intended to examine how microblogging might help participants interact with the larger professional community on Twitter. Participants stated Twitter helped them connect to other educators they already had established face-to-face relationships with and mitigate feelings of isolation and emotional overload (Wright, 2010).

Lin et al. (2013) offered an optional extra credit assignment for undergraduate and graduate students in technology-rich education courses to examine how students perceive and use Twitter. Students were asked to create a Twitter account, follow each other on Twitter, follow class hashtags, and tweet at least 75 times during the semester. Students were intentionally not given instruction on how to create an account, follow tweets, or what is a hashtag. Lin et al. (2013) found participants tended to use Twitter as more of a personal social network rather than a professional one. Participants engaged in a large volume of tweets that were not professionally related. When asked specific questions using class hashtags, students seldom responded. Survey data showed students enjoyed being consumers of tweets but seldom retweeted or replied, thus offering limited data into the usefulness of Twitter as a tool for communication and collaboration. While this limited data suggests Twitter may be a powerful tool in helping preservice teachers build relationships, Lin et al. (2013) concluded incorporating Twitter in teacher education courses should be intentional, and faculty should provide considerable scaffolding and modeling for preservice teachers.

Similarly, Johnson (2016) studied the perceptions of preservice teachers in their utilization of Twitter to establish a professional online presence. Participants, who were college sophomores in a teacher education program, reported having multiple personal social media accounts prior to entering the course, but they had no professional social media accounts. As a requirement of the course, participants created Twitter accounts they used to connect with classmates and other professionals in order to begin developing a professional presence on social media. Participants focused on using Twitter for communication as they shared professional resources via tweeting and retweeting. Evidence from pre- and post-surveys indicated Twitter had a positive impact on students' perceptions of developing an online professional presence (Johnson, 2016). In a post-survey, students reported positive feelings of being connected to other educational professionals. However, like Lin et al. (2013), Johnson (2016) stressed the importance of scaffolding professional Twitter use for preservice teachers.

Likewise, Benko et al. (2016) utilized Twitter with students in an English methods course and found Twitter offered numerous opportunities for reflection and collaboration. Data suggest that Twitter was useful for ongoing reflection and enabled preservice teachers to connect with a larger community of practitioners outside of their own institution. However, as did Lin et al. (2013) and Johnson (2016), researchers observed limitations including the need for scaffolding and guidance in helping participants develop reflection skills.

In a highly-structured and comprehensive study, Krutka (2014) found utilizing Twitter with preservice teachers in a social studies methods course offered them emotional support. Class participants completed surveys, reflective journals, and field notes, indicating Twitter helped foster a community feeling and enhanced students' relationships with the instructor, one another, and inservice teachers who used Twitter.

The research of Lou et al. (2017) also highlighted preservice teachers' desire to find support through the use of Twitter. Participants were undergraduate students in a hybrid educational technology course who were required to participate in a Twitter live chat. They were given a list of education-related chats, a video tutorial explaining how to participate, and tips for how to contribute to the conversation. Student surveys indicated a high level of engagement and a desire to continue participating in the future. Students noted benefits of chats including access to new resources and ideas, exposure to widely differing views in a safe environment, the ability to examine view from multiple perspectives, and a supportive environment in which users could get input and advice from experienced educators all over the world (Lou et al., 2017).

Finally, while the aforementioned studies were conducted with undergraduate students in teacher education programs, Domizi (2013) investigated the use of microblogging via Twitter to enhance learning and foster relationships among participants in a weekly multidisciplinary graduate seminar on teaching and pedagogy. Data included an initial reaction paper, Twitter posts from students and the instructor, and a post-seminar survey to determine if and how students' attitudes about using Twitter had changed during the semester. Analyses of the data indicated Twitter use increased participants' positive

attitudes about using the tool, and participants reported Twitter helped them feel more connected to the content and to one another (Domizi, 2013).

### Guidelines for Building a Supportive Twitter Community for Teacher Education Students

Research shows the use of Twitter benefits students in teacher education programs by providing a sense of community and emotional support (Benko et al., 2013; Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Domizi, 2013; Johnson, 2016; Krutka, 2014; Lin et al., 2013; Lou et al., 2017; Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014; Wright, 2010). Thus, continued use of Twitter may reduce new teachers' feelings of stress and isolation, which lead to new teacher attrition. Instructors involved in teacher education programs may find Twitter beneficial for preservice teachers, as participation in Twitter can help them connect with other professionals for support.

Before using Twitter with teacher education students, the instructor must create a Twitter account and become familiar with Twitter. The following online tutorials are aimed at assisting Twitter beginners with the basics.



- [Starting a PLN on Twitter: A Quick Guide for Teachers](#)
- [Intro to TweetDeck](#)

After the instructor has set up his or her professional Twitter account and become acquainted with how Twitter works, then he or she may ask students to create their own Twitter accounts as either a course requirement or optional assignment. The process of creating a professional Twitter profile page should be scaffolded, as it may look very different from students' personal social media pages. Students should be encouraged to use a professional profile photo, create a professional handle (username), and write a professional bio, which may include relevant and appropriate hashtags (#) and handles. See Figure 1 for an example of a professional Twitter profile page.

Figure 1.



The guidelines presented in Table 1 are offered for instructors in teacher education programs desiring to support preservice teachers through the use of Twitter. Tasks including how to develop a Personal Learning Network (PLN), participate in Twitter chats, tweet and retweet content, and use Twitter as a networking tool, are explained further below.

Table 1  
*Guidelines for Using Twitter to Build a Supportive Community for Preservice Teachers*

Actions	Examples
Develop your PLN.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Follow classmates, instructors, and administrators in your Teacher Education program.</li> <li>● Find other users to follow by searching hashtags related to education.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ #Education</li> <li>○ #Teachers</li> <li>○ #Students</li> <li>○ Content-area specific hashtags, such as #Math or #Reading</li> <li>○ Grade-level hashtags, such as #fourthgrade or #4thgrade</li> <li>○ Examine the Following lists of users whom you admire and determine if they include other users you would like to follow.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Participate in or start your own Twitter chats.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● An official Education Chats list may be accessed at <a href="https://sites.google.com/site/twittereducationchats/education-chat-calendar">https://sites.google.com/site/twittereducationchats/education-chat-calendar</a></li> <li>● Chats of interest:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Pretchat is geared toward preservice teachers. It occurs Thursdays at 8:00 PM Central. Moderators are @dmantz7 and @SFecich.</li> <li>○ #nt2t stands for New Teachers to Twitter. It occurs Saturdays at 8:00 AM Central. Moderators are @shyj and stephwurking.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Tweet and retweet other users' professional content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● When you develop or find a good idea or resource, share it through a tweet.</li> <li>● Include relevant hashtags and handles to enable other users to find your tweets.</li> <li>● When you retweet, give credit to the original user by including RT in front of their handle (username).</li> </ul>
Use Twitter as a networking tool.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● May assist in the job search.</li> <li>● May lead to scholarly opportunities such as research, grants, publishing, or presenting.</li> </ul>

### **Develop Your PLN**

A PLN is a network operated by an individual for the purpose of engaging in professional activities through online platforms, which support informal, self-directed learning needs (Rajagopal, Joosten-ten Brinke, Van Bruggen, & Sloep, 2011). Twitter users may follow other Twitter users' content by navigating to their profile page and clicking the Follow button. This adds those Twitter users' content to their newsfeed. Preservice teachers who follow several dozens or perhaps even a hundred or more

Twitter users including classmates, instructors, and professional educators can login to their Twitter account and scroll through their newsfeed for up-to-the-minute coverage of their followers' content in one convenient location. PLNs via Twitter provide preservice teachers with the ability to share resources and exchange ideas virtually with others whom they already know as well as users they may have never met in person before.

### **Participate in Twitter Chats**

Twitter chats are live conversations that occur on Twitter in which a group of people meet virtually at a set time to tweet about the same topic using a specific hashtag, allowing the discussion to be followed on Twitter. Hashtags organize tweets by topic, so when a tweet is used, it becomes categorized with other tweets that include the same hashtag. Each Twitter chat uses a unique hashtag so users can follow the conversation by following the hashtag. A Twitter chat may be attended by a handful of participants or even thousands from all over the world. Most Twitter chats repeat on a regular basis, such as weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly (Fouts, 2017). Twitter chats are usually moderated by one or more hosts using a question-and-answer format (Ward, 2017). Twitter chats focused on education take place regularly, and participation in such chats can be used as a way to expand one's PLN (Ward, 2017) and promote community building (Whitby, 2012).

Research shows preservice teachers find Twitter chats to be an engaging way to connect with other users, particularly teachers in their field, and often preservice teachers indicate they plan to continue participating in Twitter chats after they graduate and have classrooms of their own (Luo et al., 2017)). Preservice teachers should be guided through Twitter chats by an instructor who is familiar with the process. A tweet management system such as TweetDeck is useful in organizing chats for Twitter users, especially those who are new to chats. Instructors may find it helpful to generate a class hashtag and a list of questions on a topic of interest and hold a few class Twitter chats before assigning students to join external chats, as in-class practice may build students' skills and confidence with Twitter chats.

### **Tweet and Retweet Professional Content**

A post on Twitter is called a tweet. Sharing content through tweets is another way to connect with other users on Twitter. When preservice teachers create or find appropriate professional content, they should be encouraged to share it through a tweet. A tweet may be up to 280 characters long. Tweets may include weblinks, images such as illustrations, infographics, photographs, or (GIFs), and the user's physical location, if desired. Users may also choose to include a poll in a tweet. A retweet is when a user tweets content previously tweeted by another user, and proper etiquette calls for the retweet to feature the letters RT (retweet) in front of the original tweeter's handle, in order to give them credit.

### **Network with Others**

Twitter can provide opportunities for preservice teachers to network and collaborate with other users. For example, Twitter users may include administrators who tweet about job opportunities in their schools or districts. Preservice teachers may be able to interview for jobs about which they previously would never have heard. Online interactions through Twitter may also afford preservice teachers with scholarly opportunities such as researching, writing grants, publishing, or presenting. These types of activities would appeal to preservice teachers looking to develop their leadership skills and distinguish themselves from other teacher candidates.

### **Evaluation**

Evaluating the impact of Twitter on preservice teachers' sense of community should be an integral component of implementation. Throughout the use of Twitter with preservice teachers, instructors should reflect on how Twitter assignments meet course goals and objectives. Preservice teachers should be asked for their feedback, and assignments should be modified as needed.

Teacher educators may utilize a digital tool such as Google Forms to create free and easy-to-use surveys to evaluate their use of Twitter as a platform for building community and providing emotional support in teacher education programs. Sample survey questions may include:

- What are the benefits and/or challenges of maintaining a PLN through Twitter?
- What are the benefits and/or challenges of participating in education Twitter chats?



- What are the benefits and/or challenges of tweeting professional content via Twitter?
- What are the benefits and/or challenges of networking with others via Twitter?
- Do you plan to continue using Twitter for professional purposes? Why or why not?

### Conclusion

Data suggest Twitter may be a factor in helping support preservice teachers by providing a sense of community in a global social network (Benko et al., 2013; Domizi, 2013; Johnson, 2016; Krutka, 2014; Lin et al., 2013; Wright, 2010). Researchers assert Twitter is most useful to preservice teachers when it is incorporated into classes by design through scaffolding and modeling, which necessitates teacher education faculty who are proficient in utilizing Twitter (Benko et al, 2016; Johnson, 2016; Lin et al., 2013). Instructors in teacher education programs are likely to be the first to expose future teachers to Twitter's effectiveness as a powerful resource for support. Because one in five new teachers is likely to leave the teaching profession within the first five years (Gray, Taie, & Rear, 2015), instructors in teacher education programs should continue to investigate the impact Twitter may have on meeting the needs of future teachers and contributing to new teacher retention.

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# **E-Learning Opens Doors to the Online Community: Lessons from a Longitudinal Study**

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## **Growth of Asynchronous Online Learning**

Online education has grown in the last decade with close to seven million higher education students taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014). Retention rates were on par between online and face-to-face courses as there is concern about retention in online classes (Wladis, Conway, & Hachey, 2015). And there were no significant differences in course outcomes between these classes as well (Bolsen et al., 2016). The “democratizing” effects of online discussions have been widely anticipated (Caspi, Chajut, & Saporta, 2008; Herring, 1993; Kahn & Brookshire, 1991; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Resca, 2013), in part because the medium may subdue or eliminate status cues and online applications offer both increased access and more equal access because participants have greater liberty to occupy the non-hierarchical space at their discretion and at their own pace (Graddol & Swann, 1989; Kiesler et al., 1984; Shaw, 2016). The growth of online education has been a boon for students and instructors alike as it is offered at a time and pace that is comfortable for the tech-savvy, employed or deployed student.

Online learning is also gaining wider acceptance by academic leaders as well, largely as online learning is critical to their long-term enrollment strategy rising from less than 50% in 2002 to 66% in 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2013) and propelled by several positive structural issues as well, such as not having to have a physical classroom, a specific class meeting time and requiring minimal hardware (MacKenzie, 2015). By far, the most crucial factor for increasing the acceptance of online learning is evidence suggesting that there is no significant difference in learning outcomes between face-to-face and online instruction (Bolsen et al., 2016; Chadha & Van Vechten, 2011; MacKenzie, 2015; Russell, 2001) and in hybrid course where one class is face-to-face while the other is online (Cobb, 2016). This was additionally confirmed by an evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning, a meta-analysis and review of 50 studies comparing online to face-to-face classes and that online students performed better than those receiving the traditional face-to-face instruction (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2010). This upward trend continuing in current studies as reported in Bolsen et al. (2016).

## **Growth of Asynchronous Learning**

Increasingly more studies show that in an online asynchronous exchange format among peers were open, frank, expansive, curious, and even confessional in their willingness to share and discuss sensitive issues and are known to boost academic progression (Anderson, 2003; Chadha & Van Vechten, 2011; Merryfield, 2001b). These forms of discussions are a constructive means by which to collaborate and engage students in higher order thinking (Meyer, 2003; Faraj, Jarvenpaa, & Majchrzak, 2011) with student ownership of the discussion (Chen, Wang, & Hung, 2009). The asynchronous format places a premium on quality student-student interaction that allows for reflection and scholarly expression in text format. What’s more, discussion interactions online was more gender equitable and cross cultural than

on campus (Merryfield, 2001a; Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2015a). Other researchers point out that certain types of online tools, such as asynchronous discussion forums where students can post responses anytime, help students engage with issues and material more meaningfully because they have the chance to think through arguments, evaluate evidence, draw conclusions, reflect, and reconsider and reestablish their positions (Hamann, Pollock, & Wilson, 2009; Yoo, 2013). In fact, when students are given the time, space and ownership of discussions, it sharpens their perspective (Anderson, 2003) giving them the opportunity to interact with their peers, provide peer feedback, and reflect on the status of their personal learning goals and outcomes (Er, Özden, & Arifoglu, 2009; Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012).

### **Comparability across Courses**

Instructors across several states that had prior experiences with these collaborations, agreed to collaborate on an invitation-only web-project in courses based on similarities in the university required course objectives that would engage students in discussions about American politics. Their students who participated in the program were enrolled in these American Politics courses “virtually” linked by a collaborative project and using asynchronous discussions across different states and time zones[i]. This longitudinal study used three continuous semesters of data collected across these collaborations. While different universities participated throughout these semesters, the method, design, structure and intent of these collaborations remained identical.

Instructors agreed to distribute common standardized instructions as well as a course grade as part of their syllabus[ii]. Students were required to post a response to the same number of instructor questions and respond to the same number of students’ posts in order to build continuous dialogue, further discussions, and maintain a discussion- oriented online community. Professors monitored online student conversations for signs that students were abiding by the general rules of respect and civility, but refrained from actually participating or extending the discussion of the forums reminding students of these ground rules when necessary. Each class was a university requirement at a liberal arts Institution. Students were enrolled in the same class type, an American Politics course, across these campuses, a descriptive summary of comparisons are provided in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Courses and Participants\**

Course Title	American Politics
Course Level	Undergraduate Required American Politics Course
University Type	4 Year University
Class requirement	Face-to-Face with Online collaboration requirement
Minimum Class Requirements	8 posts/8 responses per student 75 word minimum per post/response Class requirement Grade between 10%-15%

*Note.* \*Gender and Race well distributed. *N*= 700 entries.

As Table 1 shows, all courses were undergraduate American Politics courses offered at four-year institutions. The instructors had agreed to the same common course objectives and goal for the courses themselves, each centered on lectures in classes. None of the professors furthered discussion of the instructor questions in class as well leading to these similarities. Course grades ranged from 10-15% of their total grade. Data across gender, race and other characteristics showed no significant difference in participation across their posts and responses.

Instructors rotated responsibility for posing questions weekly across a variety of contemporary and enduring issues in American Politics. The total number of required posts and responses was exactly the same by each instructor, with a similar grade percentage (10-15%) in the course as noted in table 1. The array of in class activities was the same across participating classes, further maintaining the similarities across the collaboration. Learning goals were outlined in respective syllabi, and included

developing a better understanding of other points of view, deepening (students') sense of identity as members of a political community, improving their communication, research, analytical, and critical thinking skills through short writing assignments, including those online (Chadha & Van Vechten, 2011). While not a course requirement, several students initiated their own questions furthering a sense of community. Student questions did not duplicate the instructor questions.

### **Methods**

Content analysis of online discussions that were a part of the students' course requirements were conducted across several variables over a four semester period. Over this four semester period measurement of student discussions for academic and reflectivity depth and not a knee jerk or quick reaction such as an agreement to a peers' post was performed.

### **The Dependent Variable**

To measure for the academic/reflectivity depth, an index was created comprised of five variables: reflective/deliberative + referred to class or text + provided media link + posed an honest question + length of post (+1 for short, +2 for medium, +3 for long).

To be *Reflective/Deliberative* means that students had reflected, deliberated, or reconsidered their own views when they responded to questions or when they commented on other students' posts. They puzzled through problems or issues, further questioned others, challenged others or held them accountable for their views in a positive way. They thought about the question and responded with reflective, deliberate comments. A score of 1 or 0 was assigned. + *Classroom ideas or texts*: In their responses did the students refer to ideas to which they had been exposed in class or mention their professors or discussions in class. ...*I learned this in class...* Or ...*the text says...* A score of 1 or 0 was assigned. + *References or outside links*: Did the students post or cite links to external sites when responding to questions, or did they refer to (court) cases in such a manner that one could look it up? Did they cite current events or media-related stories that could be looked up or located by another student? Did they provide an actual link to another related source? A score of 1 or 0 was assigned. + *Poses honest question*: Did the students actually ask one or more questions that enlarged the scope of the discussions; not rhetorical ones that assumed answers. "Who decides what is proper and appropriate?" A score of 1 or 0 was assigned. + *Length*: A scale of 1-3 was used: 1= a short response of usually 75 words or fewer, or up to 4 full lines of text; 2=a medium response, between 5-9 lines of text; and 3=a long response, longer than 10 lines. A scale score was assigned.

One point each was assigned to the first four of the five variables. The fifth variable, length, had a range of points. The least a student could score was one while the most a student could score was eight. The total number of postings per student (example: student X posted six times a day, five days in a row) was not a measure toward increased learning as it was not the total number of posts and responses that would be reflective, but rather the reflective score is a measurement of thoughtful understanding and contribution to a post or response.

### **The Hypotheses**

Using the academic/reflectivity index as the dependent variable, the hypothesis followed: *H1*: Student online discussions would be continuously academically reflective over the semesters. *H2*: Student online discussions would be similarly reflective across gender over the semesters similar to those based on part research by Wladis et al. (2015a). *H3*: Student online discussions would be consistent reflective across any type of question asked and over the semesters.

To measure these three hypotheses, a mixed methods approach was used. Content analysis of online discussions that were a part of the students' course requirements was first conducted across variables measuring academic usage. Next, a repeated measures anova to test for statistical significance of scores over the course of the term was used. The professors administered an anonymous, online survey during the first week of class with a follow-up survey at the end of the semester.

### **Results**

Anovas reveal statistical significance of reflectivity scores across each of the semesters. Table 2 displays the mean and standard deviation (SD) scores of reflectiveness and scores of reflectiveness by gender across these semesters.

Table 2

*Mean and Standard Deviation scores by the reflectivity index and gender over each of the semesters*

Variable	Semester	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reflectivity Index	Fall A	96.90000	53.43371
	Spring B	131.07500	50.03813
	Fall C	193.77420	110.63467
Genders of Student responding to each other	Fall A	2.23000	1.13578
	Spring B	2.32500	1.11832
	Fall C	2.08870	1.11174

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore reflectivity scores by students over the entire three semester period. Anova results ( $F$  ratio and  $\eta^2$  statistics) comparing reflectivity scores over the semesters are listed in Table 3 depicting significance in reflectivity scores by the semester,  $p < .000$  and by gender  $p < .476$  supporting hypothesis 1 and 2.

Table 3

*One-way ANOVA results ( $F$  ratio and  $\eta^2$  statistics) scores by reflectivity and gender over the semesters*

Dependent Variable	df	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Reflective Index	2	36.838	.000	.220
Gender of Respondent	2	.745	.476	.006

Given the significance for reflectivity scores over the semester and gender, LSD post-hoc significance of test differences in mean scores and standard error for each semester by the reflectiveness index and gender are reported in Table 4.

Table 4

*LSD post-hoc significance of test differences in mean scores and standard error for each Semester by the reflectiveness index and gender*

Dependent Variable		(I) Semester	(J) Semester	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Reflectiveness Index	LSD	Fall A	Spring B	-34.1750*	15.9025	0.033
			Fall C	-96.8742*	11.42469	0
		Spring B	Fall A	34.1750*	15.9025	0.033
			Fall C	-62.6992*	15.45655	0
		Fall C	Fall A	96.8742*	11.42469	0
			Spring B	62.6992*	15.45655	0
Gender	LSD	Fall A	Spring B	0.02	0.09197	0.828
			Fall C	-0.0671	0.06607	0.311
		Spring B	Fall A	-0.02	0.09197	0.828
			Fall C	-0.0871	0.08939	0.331
		Fall C	Fall A	0.0671	0.06607	0.311
			Spring B	0.0871	0.08939	0.331

To prove hypothesis 4, student online discussions across question type asked over the semesters was analyzed. Closer examination of the questions with statistical significance in the post-hoc reflectivity scores show that the question asked by the instructors was immaterial, as each question type

was responded to with significant reflectivity. The standard error, significance, and partial eta for reflectivity over eight sample questions asked are reported in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Std. Error, significance, and partial eta for reflectivity over sample questions per semester*

<b>DQs</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>Partial Eta Squared</b>
DQ 1	-28.456	17.26	-1.649	0.1	0.011
DQ 2	65.819	20.643	3.188	0.002	0.038
DQ 3	78.464	25.8	3.041	0.003	0.035
DQ 4	14.825	19.096	0.776	0.438	0.002
DQ 5	32.114	22.299	1.44	0.151	0.008
DQ 6	170.806	23.722	7.2	0	0.169
DQ 7	82.013	23.319	3.517	0.001	0.046
DQ 8	57.568	22.299	2.582	0.01	0.025

These statistically significant testing of hypotheses speak to the students' consistent interaction with each other and the material with thoughtful and deliberative discussions. The asynchronous nature of these discussions are a boon for students as they can visit and revisit discussion when they have formed seasoned opinions and when they have the time.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The Anova results support the three hypotheses in this study and give further credence to the growth of online learning supported by several researchers (MacKenzie, 2015; Russell, 2005) along with the academic vigor of asynchronous online instructions (Anderson, 2003; Chadha et al., 2011; Merryfield, 2001b; Meyer, 2003; U.S. Department of Education report, 2010) defined in the literature.

While even more research is needed to continuously examine the potential of online spaces, the present study provides an example towards creating defined online academic spaces for building and refining student work. Students 'belong' to the community of online learning, going beyond their grade requirements and in being deliberative and thoughtful, and one such example of a student exchange is provided in table 6 having to do with privacy versus speech.

Table 6: Student (names changed) exchanges in their own words.

Jill: "I think that piracy on the internet should be loosely defined. The internet should be used as a resource, a mode of communication and a store. I think that illegally downloading videos, songs and books should be more strictly regulated, and that illegal copying and sharing of that specific information should be made much more difficult. The people who produce those materials are talented artists who are trying to make a living on their creative product and copying their product is stealing. On the other side, I think that search engines as well as other websites should be able to provide links to parts of such information previously mentioned. If there are lyrics to a song, an excerpt from a book, or a short clip from a movie, that material should be acceptable and accessible. This is the resource aspect of the internet that needs to be considered. Furthermore, people should have the freedom of speech to mention these items in blogs, or on their personal web space. The authors have published this material and have intended for people to see it and integrate it their lives and opinions. Lastly I think it is the role of the producer, publisher etc., to keep track of the material that their artist has created. They made it accessible to the public, so they should keep tabs on it from there on out. Lastly, I must mention that anything that is not copyrighted (i.e. photos people post on facebook, blogs, etc.,) should have to privacy law attached to it. If you choose to post something to the internet, you should be aware that any person can look at it and share it as they please."

Tom: I agree piracy should be redefined. People downloading some free songs or a movie off the web is very different than going to a store and physically stealing them. The internet needs to be defined as what it is and the government needs to realize it is something that cannot be compared to anything else. Time will tell how we treat the internet and it's laws.

Darren: I am not arguing for or against piracy or copyright laws, I just want to understand your position. I would like to understand the difference between "downloading some free songs or a movie off the web" and "going to a store and physically stealing them." I believe they are almost the same thing. When you take something physically you are taking away property that belonged to someone else that they invested time and money into. When you download something for free on the internet that is not intended to be free you are also taking away property that belonged to someone else that they invested time and money into. They are both forms of stealing in my eyes, so how is a distinction created between them.

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[i] ] Instructors followed IRB rules on their campus. Students were told and given details about the collaboration and asked to sign consent forms, after which they were sent invitations to join this academic site. Only then could they create their own profile and participate in the discussions. If a student chose not to consent, an alternative exercise was assigned to them.

[ii] [ii] Instructors agreed that all students would be required to post and respond to the same minimum number of questions that would be a minimum of 8 posts and 8 responses. Each with a minimum word requirement, that of 75 words for posts and responses.

The collaborations were conceived as a forum for exchange of common discussions in an undergraduate American Politics course taught throughout the country. Students were not provided with any scripts of response styles other than a grade and minimum number of post requirements. Therefore, finding these significant exchanges lends to greater credence given that students were motivated to visit and revisit their responses and reach out to peers to challenge, clarify or post with academic vigor.

Much more research in this area of online and asynchronous education is needed, especially as online learning continues to grow globally. Moving forward in collaborations of this nature, varying activities such as town hall meetings or live chats with speakers could be incorporated for variety and



also to encourage participation and to accommodate different communication styles. It is possible to design a collaboration that would encourage peer interaction either verbally or in written format and studies of these would be compelling. While students indicated that there was value in the interactive components of the online introductory course, potential for improvement still exists, particularly in terms of increasing attendance and participation in synchronous sessions. Instructors may also incorporate synchronous activities such as telephone correspondence and skype-like conferences (Anderson, 2003) in addition to the asynchronous discussion activities. Future studies may examine strategies to address these issues and assess any changes in student perceptions and performance with greater online interaction. Online asynchronous learning is a story that is still being written, and how it progresses will likely depend on those present. This research additionally serves as a resource related to asynchronous course development for faculty in higher education settings.

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# Using Social Media for Induction and School Leadership Development

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## **Abstract**

Leadership for today's diverse and complex schools requires support systems to help transform classroom teachers into effective instructional leaders. Although teacher induction is commonplace, induction for educational leaders is uncommon. Licensure programs are required to provide evidence of preparing educators for success in the field to gain accreditation status. Thus, this study addressed how social media can be used to develop a flexible, effective induction program that provides the opportunity and incentive to support and foster leadership development and efficacy. It has important implications for the future of licensure programs, as well as quality instruction in today's schools.

## **Research Introduction and Rationale**

Leading in today's schools has become complex and challenging with increasing accountability, diversity, technology, and legislative mandates. Educational surveys, researchers, and journalists, as well as current school and district leaders, verify this reality (MetLife, February 2013). This complexity requires school leaders to address and overcome some of the most complex demands and expectations ever experienced in U.S. public school history. Given this reality, school leadership is no longer the job of one person; instead, it has become a developmental role requiring collaborative work with a team of educators. Therefore, developing effective school leaders requires intentional induction of its novice leaders.

School leadership generally requires teachers to complete a licensure program to even be eligible for leadership roles in schools and districts. With these new leaders coming from individual classrooms into the fishbowl of a school system, the novice leader needs a support system on the job. The principal is still the one person who all fingers point to when things go bad and, less frequently, when things go well. So it is important that the leader, who comes to this position, must be guided and nurtured to meet the challenges of leading today's schools. Teacher induction programs are commonplace, but leadership induction is often sporadic or non-existent in most districts. Most school leaders enter this role with no mentor, coach, or network of colleagues. According to Augustine-Shaw (2015) mentors are the most common; yet, fewer than half of new principals are assigned one, and half of those principals rate their mentors as only somewhat effective.

The realities of leadership needed for today's U.S. public schools, and lack of support for these leaders, provided a clear rationale to design an induction program for application across districts for a variety of new leadership roles. Considering the challenges for novice leaders, the design needed to assist them in their transformation from teacher to effective instructional leader. Specifically, our design for leadership induction in today's schools required fostering efficacy and confidence with culturally-competent, instructional skills and dispositions. To apply this program statewide, social media was particularly effective in delivering a flexible induction program to meet the needs of various leaders in multiple schools and districts.

With the help of a state grant awarded to the School of Education at Hamline University (HSE) in St. Paul, MN, funds were available to begin researching induction programs for school leaders. The target

audience for this support system for new leaders in entry-level positions within diverse, small school and districts with low achievement and achievement gaps. Although it was possible to find induction programs in some of the largest districts in our state and others, intentional principal support systems were almost non-existent in smaller districts. Identifying schools and districts to fit our profile was not much of a challenge; low achievement aligns with students living in poverty, which is now 51% (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). In addition, achievement gaps identified via NAEP state comparisons by the National Center for Educational Statistics (June 2015) provide strong evidence that MN has significant gaps between Non-white students and their White counterparts. This reality caused us to incorporate ways for new leaders to address issues of diversity and student achievement with teachers and parents, since these topics prove to be the most challenging issues and the reason many principals leave, or are asked to leave, their positions (LeFevre and Robinson, 2015).

Another incentive for the work on this project was the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation's (CAEP) recently revised standards for accreditation of university education programs. These changes, addressed in Standard 4, require the licensing institution to collect data from schools and districts that hire their graduates (CAEP, 2013). Universities desiring accreditation by CAEP must provide evidence of success in the field performance by their graduates receiving educator licenses. Like many university, our school recently implemented the means to address and monitor effective practices and student achievement outcomes by providing a year-long teacher internships through a co-teaching model. Therefore, a plan to support and monitor licensed administrators was highly important to the dean of our school and me in my role as faculty coordinator for administrative licensure.

The MDE grant was a welcome means to do both a literature review and active research by designing and implementing an induction program for our newly licensed educational leaders. These grant dollars became particularly helpful for planning and implementing a support system in the learning environments where our licensure graduates now serve in new leadership roles. Collaborative efforts with these schools and districts were a big player, but technology played a significant role.

Planning efforts began with a literature review of district, state, and organizational principal support systems and induction programs across the nation. It was possible to locate well-documented research on mentorship programs for new school leaders offered by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, Kansas, Kentucky, New York City, Albuquerque, NM, as well as a principal development program sponsored by the Wallace Foundation in six states. (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Turnbull, Riley & MacFarlane, 2015; Hall, 2008; Villani, 2006; Wallace Foundation, 2007; Weingartner, 2009).

Our inquiry process also included exploring current and past district support systems for new leaders in and around the state, particularly in our largest districts. The focus was to specifically identify and validate aspects of effective induction programs for new administrators. To continue this work with greater focus and authority, the team expanded to include a former facilitator, coach, and mentor involved with administrator development programs throughout the metro area and greater MN for many years. This grant consultant provided significant insight, research, and guidance for planning the program; he was also central to implementing the program in its first year and stayed with us through year two.

### **Theoretical and Philosophical Foundations**

Overall, our research resulted in identifying three elements essential to effective programs implemented throughout the state and across the nation. Those elements included: 1.) Mentoring provided from experienced, effective and respected principals and/or district leaders (Augustine-Shaw, Winter 2015; Hall, 2008; Weingartner, 2009); 2.) Coaching implemented by experienced school leaders who established respectful and trusting relationships, but who did not serve an evaluative role (Bloom, Castagna, Moir and Warren, 2005; James-Ward, 2013; Villani, 2006); 3.) Networking among colleagues who could share concerns, ideas, and support for one another (Drego-Severson and Aravena, 2011; Hansen and Matthews, 2002; Thomas, Grigsby, Miller and Scully, 2003).

The philosophical framework for designing our induction program for new school leaders was based upon three guiding principles, which derived from our school's conceptual foundations: Most importantly, *effective educational leaders are first learner and always teachers*. They need to articulate

and demonstrate their dedication and commitment to learning and teaching, as well as the systems used to deliver it. Second, *schools and districts must be led by instructional leaders*. The key component is “leading learning” (Fullan 2014). Fullan describes this leader as a “lead learner... who is to lead the school’s teachers in a process of learning to improve their teaching, while learning alongside them” (p.55). Finally, *successful instructional leaders are culturally competent*. They embrace difference by promoting equity and social justice, using effective communication skills, being flexible and creative, and navigating political arenas strategically.

With the research collected, and a framework solidified, the process of filling in the details for a flexible induction program began. The research partners intentionally planned to provide support to those school leaders who were not in a lead principal role; thus, the focus was on novice leaders in entry-level leadership positions. Our research validated that an effective lead principal should have an opportunity to hone their skills in a purposefully supportive environment and develop their leadership skills in an administrative position before taking on the lead principal role. Our grant consultant saw the outcomes of lead principals without induction opportunities, nor support in their new roles, as detrimental to leadership success and effectiveness. Since the objective of our research project was to design a thoughtful induction program for new school leaders, in a variety of districts, schools, and roles with varied titles, the program came to be called the School Leader Induction Program (SLIP).

### **Research implementation**

The SLIP research partners, the grant consultant and the administrative licensure coordinator, welcomed the collaborative input of three significant individuals: a HSE faculty member and technology specialist, the superintendent of our school’s partner district, and the HSE Dean and grant coordinator, since the aspects of this project needed to align with the requirements of the MDE grant. The dean also directed involvement by our technology specialist help assure access to graduates. The superintendent was informed about the research aspects of the program, including coaching, mentoring and networking opportunities, but his value was the insights he contributed about the need, validity, and viability of such a program. He also provided invaluable insights on applying the induction aspects and procedures in schools; this was important since novice administrators in his district were invited to join the induction program. To create a better link between university and district outcomes for the program and its participants, it was suggested that the participants work on their district evaluation goal as part of the induction program. This goal was easily incorporated in to the design plan to better hone specific district leadership qualities and support the participant’s work in the district. Ultimately, it became one of the two goals each participant developed for the program.

With a solid foundation of grant expectations, district preferences, and research findings on induction, the grant consultant and faculty coordinator took on the main work of implementing the program. Our first step was to clearly define mentoring and coaching. We found several definitions of coaching and mentoring, but both had distinct responsibilities. Specifically, “mentoring is the process, by which an individual with knowledge and skills in a field, willingly shares advice and support with a beginner” (Weingartner, 2009, p. 61). However, this author goes on to clarify that although coaching is part of the mentoring process, coaches are not always mentors.

Coaching, that results in effective practices, is defined and outlined with detailed descriptions in many resources. Merriam-Webster defines coaching simply as “one who instructs or trains” (Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coach> on February 13, 2015). There are also elements required for leadership coaching identified by Bloom, et al (2005). They describe “a relationship based upon trust” as the most essential of all the elements for these interactions (p. 8). Other researchers (Hall and Simeral, 2008; Knight, 2007; and Villani, 2006) substantiate this. Therefore, coaching is *not* training, mentoring, supervising, or therapy; instead, this relationship includes agreements for confidentiality, open-communication, goal-setting, observations, coaching conversations, decision-making, and reflection. Bloom, et al (2005) also describe the many forms of coaching. In the role of induction coach, different types of coaching strategies may be necessary. For very new administrators, coaching may need to be more instructional than facilitative, which is found to be necessary for transformation a school leader’s more “change-resistant domains of disposition” (p. 83).

Given our research findings on induction, we decided our program would include coaching as the focal point. Since our grant consultant was a seasoned coach with years of successful coaching interactions, he took on the role of coach. Given his past experience as a successful principal in an urban district with a very diverse school community, our coach was also very credible in addressing issues of culturally competent, instructional leadership. Without a doubt, our grant consultant was ready and willing to provide coaching to foster a leadership transformation.

Since we were uncertain who could and would serve as mentors in the districts where our induction participants would be working, we brain-stormed ways to include highly effective, experienced leaders to serve as mentors. In the end, we identified state-wide exemplary school and district leaders to contact about serving as mentors for some professional development events. Each of the professionals we contacted to serve as mentors were both flattered and willing to participate. Although this was delivered in a manner that could be identified as professional development for educators, it also provided an important opportunity for constructivist learning. As a result, the mentor sessions provided a positive forum for networking among the SLIP participants and the successful, mentor leaders.

Finally, it was also essential to plan ways to incorporate networking among our induction members. It has been long known that networking is an important element of providing support for school leaders; professional organizations of school administrators were established for this very purpose (Thomas, et al, Sept-Oct 2003). These groups provide many opportunities for professional collaboration, learning, support, and networking. Networking among educational professionals, in general, provides the theoretical basis for effectively establishing and maintaining professional learning communities in schools and districts (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). There was also the reality that networking among new administrators, with limited time in various buildings, would pose a challenge. This was further complicated by the fact that, as researchers, we wanted to facilitate the networking opportunities to monitor the knowledge and skill development related to culturally competent, instructional leadership. As facilitators and instructors of adult learners, we also understood the need for designing effective and purposeful opportunities for learning and collaborating.

An obvious means for collaboration among our induction members, given the limitations and needs, was to utilize technology for networking. Social media and the web provide this opportunity when face-to-face coaching and networking is difficult to accommodate (Ballard, 2013). The research group agreed social media could accelerate an interest in networking among the new school leaders. It was also agreed that social media tools would provide a familiar format for connecting, sharing documents, storing resources, collaborating, and learning. To assure access to a networking platform, we decided to explore Google+ tools for use among our members. The use of these tools had many advantages: they would be more accessible to a wide group of participants; they would be available at no cost; the participants may already be somewhat familiar with some of the Google tools; and many districts are already set up with gmail accounts (Villapaz, 2014).

The tech-specialist member of the planning team members was a valued resource in this area. With her guidance, we decided Google+ was the best choice of social media for professional collaboration with a small group of new school leaders. It was also decided that we needed a facilitator for networking, so the faculty coordinator for the administrative licensure program took on this role. The SLIP coach and facilitator determined they should both be in attendance at all the networking sessions taking place either online or during the mentoring sessions. To achieve this, the technology specialist served as social media trainer. Her patience and encouragement, along with her familiarity with the tools, were essential to developing the skill and comfort level with required by the SLIP facilitator and coach. They worked together, on and off, for about a month to eventually acquire tech savvy. In the end, a Google+ community was created to provide opportunities for holding chats or “Hangouts”, sharing and storing resources, and conducting group networking sessions. It was necessary to establish norms, design facilitation procedures, and practice Hangout sessions in order to comfortably and efficiently use the tools. With our learned proficiencies, the SLIP coach and facilitator committed to using Google+ tools for our entire induction program.

Identifying new school leaders to participate in the SLIP program was the final planning task. The superintendent who served on our planning committee was contacted about involvement in the program. This district, along with another smaller school district with significant diversity and involvement with our university, provided enough participants for our first year's implementation. Our intent was to invite some of our administrative licensure graduates, who were recently hired for various leadership roles in these districts, to participate in the induction program. The superintendents of both these districts were so supportive and enthusiastic about the program, that they personally connected our grads and other new school leaders to encourage them to participate. As a result, the induction program began with eight participants.

### **Implementation Steps**

Implementation of the program began with an Orientation Session shortly after the school year started. It was followed by an introductory coaching meeting and seven months of coaching sessions, three mentor-networking professional development events, and regularly-scheduled, monthly online networking sessions via Google Hangouts. The SLIP coach and facilitator took responsibility for the details of each of the program components including following-up, assessing involvement, meeting individual needs, and revising upcoming activities. Any adjustments were made after reviewing coaching notes, collecting exit cards at mentor sessions, and monitoring participation during Hangouts. In addition, continued, although periodic, involvement of the other research team members assured a solid program.

The orientation session was planned so all participants were able to attend, since few knew each other, the coach, or facilitator. An important element of this event was for each of the participants to become familiar enough with each other to assure their comfort with the coach, as well as their attendance and participation in the networking sessions. As a result, we intentionally included ice breakers, introductions, opportunities to share personal goals related to leadership, and outline the program and its delivery methods.

During the orientation session, induction participants were excited to learn about the three elements of the program. Specifically, they were informed about the monthly, hour-long coaching sessions that would occur at each participant's school site. They also heard about the three topic-specific, evening mentoring sessions that would include dinner, leadership insights, dialogues, and resources provided by exemplary mentors from around the state. They appeared satisfied with the topics, which were to include time management for school leaders, instructional leadership, and cultural competence. Finally, they learned about the creation of a SLIP Community using Google+ tools to provide a forum for group communication, resource storage and sharing, as well as the monthly networking sessions among the facilitator, coach, and participants. They specifically vocalized their appreciation to connect with others new school leaders, since they wanted and were seeking the support of others educators new to leadership. At the first year's orientation, we did not anticipate the need to provide training on the Google+ tools, since each participant claimed familiarity with using them.

Orientation ended with each SLIP participant scheduling their initial meeting with the coach to establish their goals for the program. The coach was intentional in describing the process for setting goals. The participants were directed to identify two goals: the first was to be the goal they established for the district's professional evaluation; the other goal would be self-selected and relate to the program's focus on culturally competent, instructional leadership. The coach helped revise the second goal, if it was not specifically directed to foster effective instructional leadership in the participants' diverse learning environments. Documents used to record the goal-setting process, as well as to provide evidence of the progress on those goals, were housed in group and individual shared Google files.

The SLIP coach and facilitator were delighted that both districts participating in the first year of the program utilized gmail as well as related Google tools. However, after establishing the SLIP Community using Google+ tools, we were surprised by the hesitancy of our participants to use or, for some, to even access them. Although, our participants were rather young and regular users of social media, they had questions about the use of Google+ tools. As we established shared documents and files,

we found it necessary to remind the participants about their use. As a result, we did find ourselves confronted with some unexpected issues and concerns.

Most importantly, we came to realize that tech skills varied; we found that even people who frequently use technology at a personal level had difficulty transferring those skills into the learning context. In addition, many of the participants were also learning to navigate new administrative software for their new leadership roles. Initially, this reality took priority over developing comfort with the Google+.

Surprisingly, our greatest challenge was the reality that some school-issued Google accounts did not have access to Google+ tools. The university, as well as one of the districts we were working with, had not enabled Google+ as part of their Google Apps for Education suite. In order to participate in our Google+ SLIP community during the initial year, the researchers and several participants needed to create or use a non-school Google+ account. It was a challenge to some SLIP participants, as well as the facilitator and coach, to work with a secondary Google account. This was particularly a challenge when we would send messages or reminders about an upcoming group event. At first, we only sent these to the Google+ accounts, but not all the participants checked those accounts regularly, so RSVPs were necessary.

Another unanticipated challenge during the first year was the reluctance of participants to acknowledge their own shortcomings with the technology. We had low attendance at the first few Google+ Hangout sessions, and most of the absentees did not let us know in advance. At that point we realized some participants hesitated to join a Hangout, because they either felt uncomfortable using the tool, or they did not have a chance to navigate its use before a session. To address this need, we sent invitations to the participants for individual Hangouts to practice using the tool. In hindsight, including practice with Hangouts at our Orientation Session was a needed addition.

By the mid-point of our networking sessions during our first year, we had a solid number of participants attending our online networking sessions. Our tech specialist also surveyed the participants to identify their issues and concerns with the technology for those sessions. Many were comfortable with the tools, but some disclosed discomfort with the depth of the conversation and disclosure occurring over social media among the participants. Since they were sharing concerns about students or colleagues, as well as admitting a lack of success with some leadership responsibilities, we needed to revisit the norms and validate our commitment to confidentiality.

The mentoring sessions, which also included opportunities for networking, proved to be highly valued by the induction participants. We had 100% attendance at each of these sessions. The three sessions addressed developing as culturally competent instructional leaders. The December mentor session focused on School Leadership and Time Management. Highly respected K12 principals, some already highly successful as new school leaders, were invited. The mentoring these principals provided proved captivating and inspired the novice leaders. Dialogue was centered on their stories, insights, and advice.

The February mentoring session focused on Cultural Competence. At that session our mentors included district-level and state-wide leaders whose work focused on diversity, as well as principals. The mentees actively participated in the discussions and dialogues with the mentors and other SLIP participants. The last session in May was highly interactive. It addressed Instructional Leadership and supporting teachers by creating productive learning environments through effective interpersonal communication and change leadership. New principals tend to struggle addressing issues of teacher performance and having difficult conversations (LeFevre & Robinson, 2015). For as these authors note, all new instructional leaders will need to develop these skills to increase their “effectiveness in tackling the tough interpersonal problems they encounter as they seek to improve teaching and learning” (p 89). As a result, we felt it was essential to address these issues during our final mentoring and networking session. Our mentors for this session were district and state leaders who provide professional development for school leaders, including the principals who work closely with them.

Although SLIP members were more listeners than active networkers at our first mentor session, when the coach asked each participant about the session, they all shared that it was well appreciated-



even highly valued. As the months went by and we had more online networking opportunities, participation during the mentor sessions increased. By the mid-point, networking and sharing clearly became more interactive and appreciated. The participants seemed most appreciative of having both new and seasoned leaders involved in the mentor sessions. Although different mentors provided different insights and lessons, SLIP participants became more engaged with them over time. They asked in-depth questions and identified their challenges to solicit advice. The resources provided by all the mentors we greatly appreciated, such as book titles, researchers, mottos, and metaphors. While the participants listened intently during the sessions, they also referenced the resources and mentor session content at later coaching and networking sessions. The topics included getting along with supervisors, addressing ineffective instruction with teachers, and professional aspirations.

### **Collecting Data**

As planning team members, we set out to be intentional about assessing our success with the induction program; to accomplish this we identified several methods for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. After securing approval of the participants, we established the means to share documents using Google files. We created a Google file for each participant to be shared with the SLIP coach and facilitator. This folder contained notes from coaching sessions, a midpoint and final survey, and final interview questions. The purpose for establishing individual files was to be assured the researchers could access the files and data, while the participants could assure the accuracy of the document information. We were careful about setting up these shared folders to gain accurate and reliable data to assess our outcomes.

Since the coaching sessions were scheduled to meet monthly, documents were posted after each monthly session. The content included information collected at the initial interview when the coach and participant established the two goals they would work on over the duration of the program. The notes collected during each coaching session, between the initial and the final interviews, documented the work and progress made toward attaining these goals. We verified that each participant included the goal for their district's professional evaluation process as one of the two goals. This was important since annual goal-setting for professional development and growth became a new state mandated aspect for all MN principals during the first year of the program. A predetermined set of final coaching questions were asked during the final session. The procedures used provided detailed, qualitative evidence of the successes and challenges with goal attainment achieved during the SLIP induction program.

In addition to collecting data during monthly coaching sessions, we utilized a mid-point assessment to determine all the attributes of the program. The first was done using a paper survey to allow for anonymity. It was completed after the second of the three mentoring sessions. This survey addressed the mentor professional development events, online networking sessions or Hangouts, and coaching. From this data, it was possible for the coach to make adjustments for the group, but not for individual participants, since this assessment was anonymous. Additionally, it allowed us to determine needed adjustments for our networking and mentoring sessions.

Final assessment results for the program were collected after the final coaching session. This information was collected on a Google doc and included in a participant's individual file, so they could review or revise the data collected. This survey data was collected and documented by the SLIP facilitator during a meeting conducted in-person, via a Google Hangout, or on the phone. The intent of this format was to allow for an open-ended conversation about all the aspects of the program. It was highly important to identify and collect suggestions for any improvements and changes to apply during the second year of the research process.

### **Best Lessons**

One reason for researching the SLIP was to be assured it could fit into multiple systems for use by various new school leaders. Research helped establish the need to provide supports that fit smoothly into the participants' new professional lives; therefore, our induction program had to accommodate new responsibilities and new required learning (Weingartner, 2009). The intent of the program was to foster a smooth transition from teacher leadership to a positional leadership role by providing valued learning, application of skills, and activities that could fit unobtrusively into their professional day. As a result, the

SLIP procedures required thoughtfully and carefully planning to best support that transition process. Interestingly, the best lessons learned resulted from both challenges and successes-particularly those in the first year.

As researchers, our best overall learning was how much social media can be an asset to induction. Although there were obvious issues that slowed initial participation and required additional training and practice in our first year, incorporating social media was highly successful. Overall, it provided the flexibility, opportunity, and individuality needed to support program members in varied positions and districts. For as Imbriale (2013) claims, “the power of social media and other digital tools is their ability to cross time and space” (p. 65).

Incorporating social media tools more intentionally in the second year of the program was imperative. This included a planned training, an expectation to participate in all SLIP program aspects, and opportunities to use Hangouts in alternative ways. Participants were expected to have or set up a Google+ account before they even began the program; communication was then limited to this e-mail account for the entire program. Practice using the tools was incorporated in to the Orientation during year two, and Hangouts commenced two weeks after that session. With thoughtful norms and effective facilitation, trust and sharing occurred within the first couple of months. Hangouts were also a wonderful option when emergencies arose and a participant could not keep a coaching session. When MN winter weather resulted in dangerous travel conditions, Hangouts provided the means to hold a coaching session online. It was also used for participation in the Orientation and mentoring sessions. Overall, as the SLIP coach and facilitator developed greater comfort and skill, participant use and ease with the tools developed quickly and was easily incorporated into operational procedures. Use of these tools also allowed SLIP to go statewide.

Another important lesson gleaned from implementation the SLIP was the need for effective facilitation and agendas for all our sessions. Providing a pre-planned, yet flexible, agenda for the monthly coaching sessions, mentor professional development, and Hangout sessions was very important. We were intentional about providing an opportunity to check-in as an opening activity; this practice set a tone of care and interest in the participants for each of the program elements and sessions. The need to intentionally include a positive sharing item before focusing on concerns helped create a dialogue that could refer back to the positives already identified. It was also important for a facilitator to keep the conversation moving and involve all the participants. During the closing of any event, it was important to recap the meeting topic, cite lessons learned, use examples shared during the session to provide incentive and encouragement, and refer participants to the resources available in shared Google files.

Two specific challenges required adjustments for year two of our program. The first was that although we had the support of district superintendents for participation in the program, this did not assure support from a building supervisor. As a result, we set up a meeting between the supervisor, the SLIP participant, and the coach prior to the first coaching session. This established a greater commitment to all the elements of the program by both the participant and supervisor. This was important, since the new leaders often needed to carve out time from their professional day to actively participate and get the most from the three program elements. Communication with district and school administrators was an important part of this process, particularly because we hoped to connect with many new leaders in a variety of districts, while also supporting district leadership objectives and goals.

A second less challenge identified was the need for almost half of the participants to adjust their personal goal. The goal identified by the district provided a solid focus for coaching work and positively impacted district evaluation outcomes for the new leader. However, personal goals are often lofty and frequently needed adjustments; the coach often lead the effort to refocus these, particularly if little or no commitment or effort were apparent by the third coaching session. Overall, December coaching sessions often went off task, as the holiday season, term changes, and taking on new workloads caused a diversion for the new leaders. However, the challenges experienced allowed the SLIP coach to do some “instructional coaching” (Bloom, et al, 2005) and redirect the new leaders to reach their goals and achieve positive outcomes.

Despite challenges, our surveys provided evidence of success. The final survey scores used the following Likert scale: 1 for very dissatisfied to 5 for very satisfied. The scores documented an average of 4.7, from the first-year participants, on the 5 point scale for developing as an instructional leader in the program. Survey data also validated satisfaction with the design and aspects of our program. While the program was designed to develop cultural competence, this attribute received an average of 3.57 in the first year, but it received a 4.2 average score by the mid-point in the second year of the program. By the end of the program, first year participants validated developing skills and strategies to support teachers and learning with an average score of 4.29, while, second year participants scored 4.2 in this category by the mid-point of the program. Surprisingly, development of efficacy scored only 4.0 at the end of the program by first year participants; however, half-way through the second year of the program, every survey respondent provided a score of 5.0 for this attribute.

Three notable successes highly contributed to the program's successes. First, the distinction between "coaching" vs. "mentoring" was highly important. The participants appreciated that their coach, who provided mostly cognitive coaching, was not a supervisor; instead, they confirmed their coaching provided an opportunity for conversation and discovery, so these leaders could identify the best choice or course of action for a given concern, situation, or goal without concern of evaluation.

Coaching received very high scores on the final assessment after year one, the scores validated that the new leaders most appreciated the coaching sessions, over the two other components, with an average of 4.36 on a 5 point scale. Specifically, coaching work on goals scored 4.29, but developing leadership skills via coaching earned 4.43. The interview questions also identified clear evidence of important skills learned from the coaching sessions: reflective practice, strategic planning, and positive interpersonal interactions. Each of the respondents also validated how much they valued the trusting relationship developed and coaching skills utilized.

Opportunities to network with other new administrators during Hangouts and mentoring professional development events were also highly valued by the participants. The networking opportunities both received a score of 4.29 on a 5 point scale. In particular, they were thankful for getting to know other new leaders; they also appreciated knowing that leadership experiences and issues were similar across school levels, districts, and the state. In regard to the mentoring sessions, participants appreciated the resources and insights offered from the state-wide exemplary mentors. The same appreciation was validated through the mid-point assessment, by the second group of SLIP participants, during year two of the program.

As coordinator for Administrative Licensure, a personal rationale for developing the SLIP was to increase confidence and efficacy among the new leaders. Comments collected from our participants provided evidence of this positive outcome. The following regarding coaching included: "Amazing! [The coach] did a great job of asking guiding questions, listening, and helping set up an action plan;" and "[The coach] could walk me through a variety of ways to handle a potential situation... so I had a better plan when embarking on the challenge;" and "LOVE that I get to set the goals and topics for what we talk about. It is so nice to have a coach that has no evaluative role in my professional life--he's just an advocate for me and what I'm working on with no other organizational agenda. It's priceless!!" Quotes that documented success in other areas were these: "The SLIP program did connect me with other new leaders from other schools. Hangouts validated our similarities;" and "The Hangout and mentor sessions had practical meaning for our role. Sharing was helpful for suggestions and validation. Will this be available next year too?;" and "It is great to have connections at different schools....Great to hear how leaders at different levels deal with their work. Maybe we should have Hangouts more often."

Given the evidence collected, it was clear the SLIP induction program, designed and implemented for our recent licensure graduates and collaborating districts, was a success. Its implementation and the evidence collected provide the evidence needed to support offering and expanding this program into other districts without their own induction program for new school leaders.

### **Conclusions**

This study required a review of social science literature; it also contributes to that research in relation to learning and leading in diverse educational settings. Our active research, conducted over the past two

years, utilized and validated effective induction strategies incorporating the use of social media to create a flexible program for use by various leaders in multiple settings.

To prepare a new school leader for instructional leadership, it is essential that they have a learner focus or growth mindset. This “mindset” allows the leader to continuously learn-from mistakes, from others, and from an active process of planning, implementing, assessing, and modifying ideas and solutions (Dweck, 2006). These qualities were developed and fostered through our SLIP induction program and fostered by a commitment to learning. The SLIP participants and learners also discovered that, as leaders, they must develop trusted, interpersonal skills, which Kouzes and Posner (2010) declare as essential to effective leadership.

For today’s U.S. public schools, we need principals who are culturally competent, instructional leaders. However, highly effective instructional leadership does not require a principal to micromanage teachers in their classrooms (Fullan, 2015). Instead, successful school leaders must identify and support teacher leaders who can guide instruction and coach teachers to improve student learning. School leaders must then develop a leadership team with varying areas of expertise and skill (Kotter, 2010). The SLIP participants came to understand that they need a team of colleagues who can learn together, and as a leader, they must create a learning environment that meets the varied learning needs of students to succeed in today’s global society (Lindsey, Robins and Terrell, 2009). Since this is the intended outcome for the schools where a principal will lead, it was our goal to design and establish an induction program to prepare novices for the role and responsibilities of lead principal or culturally competent, instructional leader.

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## Teaching the Organization of Writing in Online Graduate Courses

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to address the similarities and differences of teaching graduate students how to write scholarly papers in online courses as compared to teaching them in person. Whereas a research report typically includes five major sections – the introduction, review of literature, method, results, and conclusions – that are derived from the scientific method, an academic paper for class takes on a less salient format. A system of writing that addresses the title, introduction, advanced organizer, headings, body of paper, summary, and references can be delivered in an online setting, will help focus online graduate students demonstrate and perfect writing skills which are essential to develop.

### **Introduction**

Online writing instruction offers an evolutionary approach to the teaching of writing that is not altogether different or revolutionary than teaching it in person. Due to the need of communicating nearly everything by written means, online courses present students with more opportunities to showcase their writing abilities. Requiring students to write can infuse them with a sense of energy, drive, and accomplishment. These are qualities that lead them to success in school and in life. Writing also fosters metacognitive abilities by encouraging students to organize their ideas in a logical fashion that can lead to persuasive communication with others. Thus, honing their writing skills enables them to clarify and give more valid meaning to and interpretation of ideas and issues. It becomes a way of ordering ideas and experiences such that they can integrate what they learn with what they discover. Through writing, students develop the self-discipline needed to construct and convey ideas in an organized and readable format, which is increasingly necessary now that so much is conveyed electronically. So, how can we get students to write well and do so in a way that is just as effective online as it is onsite?

For many students, a major roadblock to writing is not knowing how to go about starting to write; they have a fear of the unknown. This is compounded in an online course, where so much about the course, including the instructor, is obscure. This uncertainty can cause students to get anxious, procrastinate, and then make excuses for having to throw something together at the last moment, when they should have been working methodically and progressively all along. The motivational expert Zig Zigler (2000) states that we do not pay the price for success but rather enjoy the fruits of success and pay the price for failure. Just as in person, students online need advice and guidelines on how to begin the writing process to avoid failure.

## **Organization of Writing**

There is no single way to write an academic paper. Conducting and reporting research have a fairly consistent model for students to follow. This design is based on the scientific method and a basic research paradigm. Unfortunately, once away from research, the element of design changes so that there are no prearranged steps to guide students through the thought process. Consequently, writing efforts tend to lack focus, and students ramble while searching for direction. Some students will produce several pages of generic material without revealing where the paper is headed. Other students will produce 25 page documents without a single heading and barely a paragraph separation. They need help conceptualizing and organizing their work. While the prospect of writing a term paper may be initially imposing for students, there exists a system for writing that divides it into smaller, more palatable segments. This system for structuring and organizing papers has seven strands: the title, introduction, advanced organizer, headings, body of paper, summary, and references. First let us examine each part of this system then see how we can best facilitate such a system in an online format.

### **Title**

A major aspect of learning to write for students is the selection of the topic and then the narrowing or delimiting of the topic. Developing a proper descriptive title for the paper is the crucial first step that can help serve two basic functions. The first function of the title is to help students focus their efforts, while the second function is to inform the reader about what is to be reported in the paper. With students constantly searching for information online nowadays, it may help to suggest that they choose a title that they would enter as a search query were they to look up information on that topic.

### **Introduction**

The introduction to a paper establishes the theme and rationale for the importance of the topic. In addition, it serves to pique the reader's interest. The content of the introduction should be pertinent to establishing the direction of the paper and provide essential background material that sets the stage for what is to come in the paper. The writer does not need to provide the entire history of the topic in the introduction, as few readers want to read multiple pages of material that are not directly pertinent to the thrust of the paper. What would be a good length for an introduction? Consider two to four paragraphs as a space allocation for this segment. Near the end of the introduction should come an advanced organizer.

### **Advanced Organizer**

An advanced organizer has a twofold intent. First, it tells the reader what is going to be covered in the paper. The second virtue of an advanced organizer is to keep the student from rambling. We recommend that students create a range of three to seven points or questions that the paper will cover. These are not hard and fast numbers but serve as a guideline and frame of reference from which to work. Keep in mind that many students think in terms of graphic organizers and can be confused about what exactly constitutes an advanced organizer. The advanced organizer is akin to a roadmap for the reader to provide the direction of what is to come.

Developing a good advanced organizer requires the writer to pull together related questions or points that have a strong relationship to each other and order them in a way that establishes a sense of logic in the paper's flow. A good writer avoids using disparate points that are merely on the same topic as the paper. The points or questions used in the advanced organizer provide the writer with a framework from which to sequence material presented.

Neophyte writers frequently do not realize that they ramble or that they are being redundant with material. By providing a framework for the paper, the advanced organizer helps students to avoid rambling and redundancy. The following is an example of an advanced organizer: To investigate spirituality, this paper will (1) provide illustrative definitions, (2) explain three points of tension that help the understanding of divergent definitions, and (3) suggest a way to categorize definitions according to the worldview that the definition affirms. Here is another example: The subtype ADD will be the focus of this paper and will provide information on (1) characteristics, (2) etiology, (3) teacher perceptions, and (4) potential instructional modifications. Yet another example: This paper will review research findings in which teachers and kindergarten children interact that are conducive to language acquisition. Viewpoints on (a)... (b)..., and (c)... will be examined.

Some examples of lead-ins for advanced organizers include the following: “This paper examines the four elements of...” and “This paper will examine the needs of preschool children by addressing the following topics on...” By using advanced organizers like these, students know where to put the content of their papers and readers know both the dimension and direction of the paper they are about to read.

### **Headings**

Headings serve as yardsticks for the paper. Students should directly align each heading with the points or questions that were developed in the advanced organizer. These benchmarks allow the reader to easily follow the organization of the paper and know where specific content can be located. Both the advanced organizer and its respective headings will help writers structure the material they wish to report.

An additional advantage of using headings is to aerate the paper. Headings and graphic displays like boldface, italics, numbering, and bullets can be of assistance in accentuating material. They assist in allowing the reader to garner major points that are being developed. Simple diagrams, charts, and graphs may sharpen the paper; however, the student should understand that the intent of these tools are to clarify and not decorate the paper.

### **Body of Paper**

In preparation for writing papers, students should consider their writing style. At one time, writers typically wrote in long intricate paragraphs. A preferred writing style today is toward more reader friendly paragraphs. For example, full page paragraphs can lose the reader while shorter paragraphs have the advantage of giving both the eyes of the reader and their minds a brief respite. It is suggested that students vary the length of their paragraphs without depriving the salience of their work. At the same time, students should be aware of the distracting nature of having too many short paragraphs in a row.

Two basics of good paragraph writing is unity and consistency. With unity, the writer has one idea per paragraph, and they place the idea at the very start thus informing the reader what the paragraph is about. Consistency involves having sentences that are related, connected, and flow well together. Transitional sentences maintain the readers’ attention by alerting them what is ahead. Not all closing sentences to paragraphs or strands need to be transitional in nature; however, a reasonable number of them facilitate the flow of ideas and the overall logic of the paper. Dangling words and disjointed phrases, sentences, and sections can make reading a paper a chore. Students need to learn to coax their readers comfortably from one concept to another.

When students provide a series of paragraphs in which they cite the work of one writer after another, we call this abstracting the material. A better technique in writing a paper is to blend information from multiple sources. For example, one may convey that “Jones (2014) posits that...” and Smith and Weston (2015) agree and additionally perceive that...” However, students need to be careful with dates and sequencing. One would not have Lowe (2015) agreeing with Luck (2016) considering that the Luck article was not available at the time Lowe’s was published.

It is important to remind students that punctuation can make a difference. The classic example of this is the professor who provided the passage “Woman without her man is nothing.” Students were instructed to punctuate it correctly. The females responded: “Woman! Without her, man is nothing.” The male students offered: “Woman, without her man, is nothing.” Is there a difference? You can be certain of that. Grammarly.com is an excellent web site to help students edit and check the mechanics of their writing.

Students should learn to make the reader involved with the paper. One technique is to ask questions. The caveat is to be sure to address the questions.

It is advocated that students avoid excessive jargon and pedagese. Simple vocabulary works best. The intent of the paper is to communicate student knowledge of the topic, not to test the professor’s dictionary vocabulary. Too many obscure words can obfuscate a passage as opposed to delivering clarity. Strunk and White’s (1999) book *The Elements of Style* is excellent reading to help students understand how to simplify their writing and remove extraneous words and sentences. It is now available for a free download at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/37134>.

### **Summary**



Not all papers need a summary. For example, if the student developed a sequence of material, it may not need to be drawn back together. However, in many papers, a summary section helps pull the presented information together. In addition, the summary section may be a time for the student to share conclusions based on the body of material they have presented.

### **References**

The works cited in papers are a point of credibility for the students' research. They further establish their credibility as writers by carefully checking the accuracy of their references. Students need to judiciously match the style of referencing with that prescribed by their professors. When professors see reference pages containing numerous errors, the credibility of the work comes into question. Within the field of education, we predominately use the style approved by the American Psychological Association (APA). With this format, students need to be sure that citations in the body of the paper are included on the reference page and that the dates of the reference material match those cited in the paper.

### **Online Courses**

While the organization of writing remains the same whether employed in either onsite or online courses, online courses offer additional prospects and challenges for getting students to understand how to organize their writing. Because so much of the communication in online courses is through writing, online courses present opportunities for teaching writing that traditional courses do not have. As Warnock (2009) points out, "the online format – *by its very nature* – requires students to learn to use writing to interact with others" (p. xi). By encouraging students to adopt aspects of this organizational system of writing in all of their written communication, whether they are contributing to a discussion forum, creating a blog, or simply engaging in e-mail, instructors can further reinforce these writing habits in their students.

Moreover, a total paper need not be submitted at one time; instructors can chunk each component of the writing process as separate assignments in the course, thus modeling the strategy of partitioning a large task into smaller, more manageable parts in order to meet its completion. First, students can submit a title and potential references that support the topic. Then, students can compose an introduction. Even coming up with an advanced organizer or incorporating transitional elements into a paper could be made into separate, dedicated assignments to help focus students on each aspect of organizing their work. Last, bringing all the developed components of the paper together and editing it can be assigned as a final, culminating assessment.

### **Importance of Reading to Writing**

In addition to writing frequently, students learn best how to write when they *read frequently*. Readings and discussions about accepted writing practices and strategies should be introduced in all online courses where writing will play a major part. For instance, "Writing for Professional Publication: Three Road Signs for Writing Success" by Buttery (2010) and "Writing Research Reports for Publication: Recommendation for New Authors" by Fuchs and Fuchs (1993) serve as good resources for graduate students seeking to publish.

While reading various background articles on their topic, students can leverage their reading time. They can be on the watch for writing techniques, ingenious introductions, quotations and examples, and even the details of punctuation and grammar. New writers should be on the lookout for nice phrases that they may wish to assimilate in their own writing. Here is a sample of some key phrases that they should add to for possible use in their writing:

- This supposition is supported by...
- In accordance with...
- The research evidence is not sanguine concerning...
- A kaleidoscope of viewpoints exists about...
- Such findings are highly congruent with...
- A disparity of viewpoints exists on...
- This strategy is the inverse of...
- ...takes the stand that...

### **Personalization**

Students must have the freedom and encouragement to apply what they learn to meet their own specific needs and situations. The composition of every course will include students at different points in their careers and maybe from different disciplines. The course should help students reflect on what they are learning and adapt that learning to suit their individual needs. By allowing students to personalize their learning, they are more apt to do a better job in the course and with their writing, as they will see it fulfilling a personal need that they have. A strong suggestion is to have students think about how they might apply their written assignments to future course study, their jobs, or other important aspects of their lives.

### **Community**

Writers can learn from and share with each other, and students learn best in an interactive classroom, whether it is physical or virtual. The course should seek to establish a sense of community among members of the class, and emphasis should be placed on discussions and real-world, interactive assignments. Furthermore, in an environment where students can easily escape attention, all of the students should have the opportunity to contribute to the course and each other's writing. Organizing a round robin peer review activity where each student concentrates on one aspect of writing and proofs each classmate's paper on that aspect is an efficient and not overly bearing activity that can get students to read and write about each other's work. Another way to build community in an online course is to make sufficient and meaningful use of the discussion forum. Requiring an arbitrary amount of responses to each other's posts is both artificial and can be viewed as the students as "busywork." Requiring instead for students to point out the best and worst posts and why they picked them, for instance, provokes more critical thinking in their writing and opportunity for discourse between students.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching graduate students how to organize their writing does not have to be difficult in online courses, but it is new. The online medium poses a new way to apply age-old theoretical and pedagogical concepts about the teaching of writing while offering different ways of promoting, disseminating, and reviewing student texts. It is important to continue to delineate the process by which good, scholarly writing is organized but adapt it to the world in which current students learn and interact. By offering a writing-intense, reading-intense, personalized, interactive community for learning, online courses can be a place where students learn and grow together to pursue their own writing as they progress through and beyond their online coursework.

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## **Virtual Teams: A Case Study in Adult and Career Education**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on the findings of a case study in two Adult and Career Education project management courses where virtual teams were used to enhance online education. Today, technology, globalization, and the need for fast responses to marketplace demands have dramatically changed the way courses are delivered. Many students may be physically separated and required to work together effectively without having ever met each other face-to-face. The new test facing professors is how to get these virtual team members to work well together across geographic, cultural, and organizational boundaries and deliver results quickly, effectively, and consistently.

This study includes a brief literature review of virtual teams, strategies suggested for virtual teams, the process used for the case study, and feedback from the students in the course. Lessons learned as recommendations for future implementation will also be included.

### **Introduction**

Conference Board (2006) *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce* sounds a wake-up call to a business community already concerned about the potential of the future workforce.

The business community overwhelmingly identified educators as the sector most responsible for creating a workforce ready to compete (K-12 Education -- 75.6 percent, Four-Year College – 68.4 percent, Two-Year College – 45.2 percent). Employers report that new entrants to the workforce need not only the basic skills—reading, writing and math—but that in the 21st century business world, possessing a range of applied skills directly related to the workplace is critical to success. When asked to rank skills in terms of their importance in the workplace, employers put professionalism, teamwork, and oral communication at the top of the list. Based on the study, one of the key skills sought after in the 21<sup>st</sup> century graduate is the need to be global, instant, and in constant communication as well as the ability to be a functional member of long-distance teams. (p. 20).

To prepare to be effective virtual team members, students need to develop virtual teamwork skills including communicating effectively, working with team members to solve problems, negotiating with colleagues, resolving conflicts, and collaborating with people from other cultures (Goold, Augar, & Farmer, 2006). Since online students are already geographical dispersed and rely on technology for

communication, incorporating virtual team projects into online courses is a logical step. Ubell (2010) suggests including a team project in every online class.

One key facet of change taking place in the Adult and Career Education Department (ACED) at Valdosta State University and at institutions of higher education around the world is the growth of online learning. Allen and Seaman (2014) stated that, currently, 32 percent of higher education students take at least one online course during their academic career. The 2014 Survey of Online Learning conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group reveals the number of students taking at least one online course has now surpassed 7.1 million. "The rate of growth in online enrollments remains extremely robust, even as overall higher education enrollments have shown a decline," said study co-author Jeff Seaman.

As the number of online courses offered in ACED increases, online education presents an opportunity to reexamine the effectiveness of our educational work. The trend towards online learning has propelled this author to incorporate online groups in her classes. Online groups are usually small and designed to help online students develop problem-solving skills, share and challenge one another's ideas, and better prepare them for future careers (Jonassen, 2000; Koh, Barbour, & Hill, 2010; Smith et al., 2010).

Yet, online group work presents new challenges for students. They are required to manage online group work, including arranging their online and offline study environments (Deimann & Bastiaens, 2010), coordinating time for group work (Biasutti, 2011), handling online and offline distractions (Whipp & Chiarelli, 2004), keeping themselves motivated (Smith et al., 2011), and coping with negative emotions in the group work process (Ku, Tseng, & Akarasriworn, 2013).

How can faculty in higher education enhance their teaching effectiveness in online group learning environments? With more and more courses being offered online, faculty are expected to be master teachers in both face-to-face and online environments. This research seeks to contribute to that effort by exploring the effectiveness of group work in a virtual environment.

Classes in all formats have distinct strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps the greatest strength of face-to-face courses is the degree to which they facilitate building relationships and community in and out of the classroom. Increasing access to "non-traditional" or place-bound students may be the greatest strength of online and hybrid courses, which enable universities to include people who desire a degree or certificate but who cannot come to campus regularly or at all. For public universities, such as Valdosta State University, which has a mission to expand its programmatic outreach by developing and offering programs by distance learning and at off campus locations throughout the region, this goal of increasing access is especially significant.

This study is an analysis of outcomes in a course that has been taught by the author in a fully online delivery format over two semesters in the Adult and Career Education Department of Valdosta State University. The study will focus on a case study in Adult and Career Education courses where virtual teams were used to enhance online education.

A decade or so ago, virtual teams were almost nonexistent. Today, technology, globalization, and the need for fast responses to marketplace demands have dramatically changed the way courses are delivered. Many students may be physically separated and required to work together effectively without having ever met each other face-to-face. The new test facing professors is how to get these virtual team members to work well together across geographic, cultural, and organizational boundaries and deliver results quickly, effectively, and consistently.

This study will include a brief literature review of virtual teams, strategies suggested for virtual teams, the process used for the case study, and feedback from the students in the course. Lessons learned as recommendations for future implementation will also be included.

### **Literature Review**

In a study published by the Academy of Management Executive, the authors describe a virtual team as a "group of people who work independently with shared purpose across space, time, and organization boundaries, using technology to communicate and collaborate." As such, virtual teams allow organizations to bring together people with the best expertise, regardless of where they live. Many factors affect group work, such as types of tasks, technology, group size, and individual accountability (Hathorn & Ingram, 2002). Roberts and McInnerney (2007) identified some major problems in online

group learning, including students' resistance to the idea of group work and their lack of skills for group work. If done correctly, however, online group work can help optimize student learning. MacNeill et al. (2014) emphasized that online group work can provide learners with a much deeper and richer experience and is a good opportunity for learners to develop high-order thinking skills and learn how to deal with complex and abstract tasks. The key issues in the virtual team literature that will be discussed in this study are communication and technology.

In a literature review of virtual team research, Powell et al. (2004) found that virtual team success were linked to team-building exercises, establishment of shared norms, and the specification of a clear team structure. According to the review, relationship building, perceived team cohesiveness and the level of trust are other factors that impact on the level of satisfaction with working within virtual teams.

Communication is a very important factor in virtual team effectiveness, according to Horwitz et al. (2006) and Kayworth and Leidner (2000). Communication is how people develop relationships and how they work together. Online communication has been found to be less friendly and more impersonal than face to face, although it can also be more task-focused. Furthermore, asynchronous forms of communication such as email can escalate conflict because of the lack of visual and audio clues to help interpret the words used. People in a virtual team may feel less of a sense of identity with their team or organization and hence be more critical of fellow team members (Brake, 2006). The reduced sense of team identity, sometimes combined with anonymity in some online environments, may lead people to voice their dissent more strongly than they would in a face-to-face situation (Andres, 2006).

Students are attracted to online courses because of the convenience of being able to participate anytime from anywhere, but once enrolled can become dissatisfied with the experience (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2010). One of the reasons for this dissatisfaction is that online learners sometimes feel disconnected from others (van Tyron & Bishop, 2009). Rovai (2002) reported that faculty has difficulty in facilitating student interactions online. Thus, there is a need to create online learning environments that foster a sense of community. Rovai (2002) summarized it best in the following statement:

Research provides evidence that strong feelings of community may not only increase persistence in courses but may also increase the flow of information among all learners, availability of support, commitment to group goals, cooperation among members and satisfaction with group efforts. (p.3).

Virtual teams rely on a variety of technologies to perform collaborative work. These technologies help team members' exchange and manage data. There is a range of collaboration tools available to teams (e.g., [Blackboard Collaborate](#)), document sharing (e.g., SharePoint, Drop box), document cocreation (e.g., Google Docs), and project management tools (e.g., Microsoft Project, Basecamp). With today's technology, it is thought that collaborative group projects can now be done easily. However, the use of online collaboration carries its own challenges, and it is important that instructors are aware of those when planning online collaboration projects.

The greatest challenges involved in the use of online tools for collaboration are the diversity of technology and distance of the group members. Some may be part-time students who work full-time and some may be in time zones as much as five or six hours apart. Arranging a mutually available time for the group members to speak in person can be difficult.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of 53 undergraduate students enrolled in a three-credit hour course in Project Management either Spring 2016 or Fall 2016. Students were from different majors that included Human Capital Performance, Workforce Development, Office Administrative Technology, and Organizational Leadership. Students enrolled in the course because it was required or because it could be used as an elective.

### **Course Description and Team Format**

The course used for this study was an undergraduate adult and career education course in project management. Researcher and the instructor of the courses were the same person.

Given that many of these distance learners may reside across the globe and study in different time zones, the online learning approach adopted in the curriculum was aimed to provide maximum flexibility. The instructor formed teams of four based on the following criteria:

DISC profile, major, and response to experience working in groups. The DISC profile is a tool designed to improve work productivity, teamwork, and communication. The profile provided a common language that students could use to better understand themselves and adapt their behaviors with others within a work team.

Using a tool designed by Byrnes and Byrnes (2006), participants were asked to think about their experience working in groups and select the response that best suited their experience.

A. I enjoy working in groups because my group members usually help me understand the material and tasks and therefore I can perform better.

B. I question the value of group work for me, because I usually end up doing more than my fair share of the work.

C. I have little or no experience working in groups.

D. I have a different experience than the choices given above. Please describe.

One way to improve the chances that a team will work well is to agree beforehand on what everyone on the team expects from everyone else. Teams were required to create a Team Expectation Agreement. The agreement was adapted from Oakley, Felder, Brent, and Elhadj (2004). The agreement included the following components:

- Designate managers: Who on your team will fill each of these roles? The Project Manager will be responsible for helping the project remain in scope, reporting to the stakeholders, and presenting a regular project update to the larger group. The Time Manager will be responsible for helping teams remain on schedule and coordinating schedules between teams that have dependent deliverables. The Quality & Risk Manager will be responsible for helping teams identify possible challenges or stumbling blocks, and getting the supplies or other resources needed to help teams produce their deliverables with a high quality. The Communication Manager will be responsible for keeping track of the project materials and ensuring that the teams are communicating with each other and stakeholders.
- Agree on a common meeting time and what each member should have completed before the meeting (readings, taking the first cut at some or all of the assigned work).
- Do the required individual preparation.
- Review returned assignments. Make sure everyone understands why points were lost and how to correct errors.
- Dealing with non-cooperative team members. If a team member refuses to cooperate on an assignment, his/her name should not be included in the completed work. If the problem persists, the team should meet with the instructor so that the problem can be resolved, if possible.

When forming groups, it is important to give students ownership, freedom and autonomy, allow them to clarify their roles and specify their topics, and let them control the content, process, and outcomes of their group work (Brindley et al., 2009)

The virtual team environment was created through the Blackboard online learning portal. The Blackboard environment was created specifically to allow online team members to work collaboratively on their virtual team assignments. As part of the course, teams used BlazeView (Brightspace by D2L) the university's learning management system that allowed them to use private group discussion areas, chat areas, email, and other collaboration tools. Having a shared common space is essential for virtual teams (Ubell, 2010). Participants used Google Docs, an online word processor that allowed them to create and format documents and work with each other; and Group Me, a free group messaging app that is a free and simple way to stay in touch with the group.

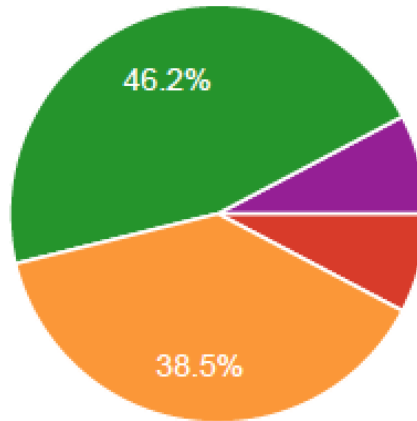
From the instructor's perspective, monitoring each group's work can help students stay on track. Brindley et al. (2009) suggested that instructors provide clear and transparent learning goals, group tasks, timelines, and explicit expectations in the course syllabus to ensure that group work tasks are achievable and properly scheduled. Monitoring the process of group activities and providing timely

feedback on learning content and tasks and participation can also help students build good relationships (Coll, Rochera, deGispert, & Diaz-Barriga, 2013).

**Findings**

Data analysis indicates that the participants enjoyed group work. Chart 1 indicates that over 46 percent of the participants stated that this was their best experience working in groups.

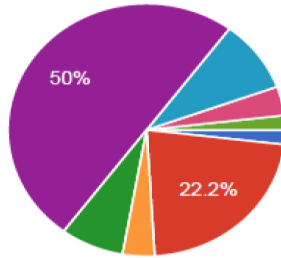
Chart 1. How well did you work together as a team?



This was one of my best experiences of doing Group Work.	46.2%
This was an adequate Group Work experience.	38.5%
I did not enjoy working with this group, but I did learn a lot.	7.7%
This was one of my worse experiences of doing Group Work.	0%

Participants indicated that communicating with each other was the key strategy used to encourage fair contribution from all members. Communication is a key factor impacting the overall performance of a team.

Chart 2. What strategies did you use to encourage fair contribution from all members on the group assignment?

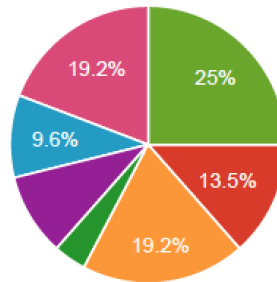


Used peer strength	1	1.9%
Shared workload	12	23.1%
Set deadlines	2	3.8%
Respected peer opinions	4	7.7%
Communicated with each other	27	51.9%
Encouraged participation	5	9.6%
Set deadlines	2	3.8%

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers' Job Outlook 2016 survey, employers look for leaders who can work as part of a team. More than 80 percent of responding employers said they look for evidence of leadership skills on the candidate's resume, and nearly as many seek out indications that the candidate is able to work in a team. Employers also cited written communication skills, problem-solving skills, verbal communication skills, and a strong work ethic as important candidate attributes.

Data analysis indicates that the participants developed skills in teamwork (25%), leadership (19.2%) and communication (19.2%).

Chart 3. What skills do you feel you develop when you work on a group assignment?



Inter-cultural communication	0	0%
Interpersonal skills	7	13.5%
Leadership	10	19.2%
Academic development	2	3.8%
Time Management	5	9.6%
Self development	5	9.6%
Communication	10	19.2%
Teamwork	13	25%

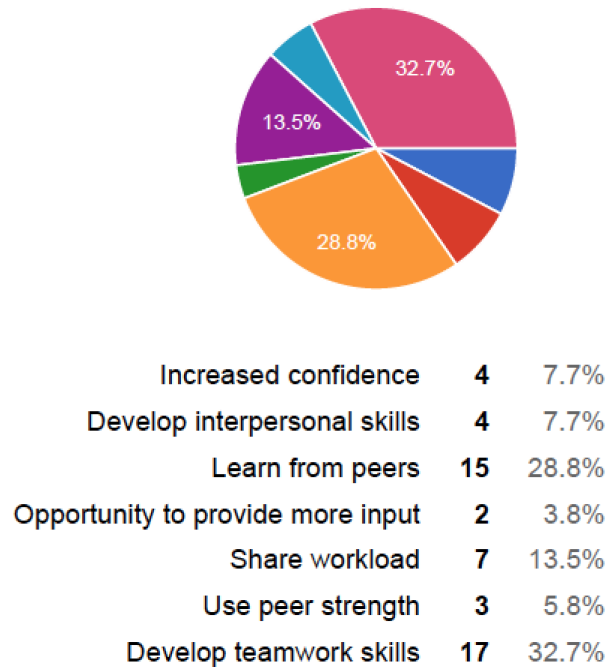


Following are some of the comments participants made regarding the skills learned in the course.

I enjoyed the ability to share ideas / thoughts and work with a team rather than doing everything on my own. We had both positive benefits from utilizing technology as well as some frustration with group technology from lost ability to communicate on black board. Google email and Google Docs as well as group me text all worked great.

I do have the strong feeling now though that although working with a group with schedules can “slow down what you might think you could have done on your own.” It is much better knowing that individuals in the team can be responsible for different segments of the project. Knowing that you don’t have to do it ALL, and knowing that when your confused in an area, you have your team to help get you on a path of understanding. I believe group effort via project team management is a good thing and brings success to an organizational project.”

Chart 4. What do you think is the greatest benefit of working on group assignments?



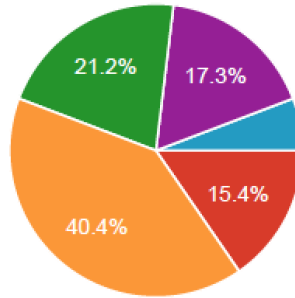
Following are some of the comments participants made regarding the skills learned in the course.

Working in a virtual team can be beneficial if you give it a chance. This class provided a great experience for learning each step for completing a successful project. At first I didn’t understand the need for a personality test or how it related to this class. I determine the appropriate roles for the team.

I had to develop patience for this class. I have a tendency to work on an assignment until it is complete, but in this class you must take your time and fully embrace each step. Determining and maintaining standard meeting times with the group was the key to our success. We were not 100% successful with every meeting, but every person took responsibility to ensure they knew what they needed to do for our team.” This virtual team experiment has helped me to gain confidence in leading a team and directing others. I don’t feel this class would have been as successful for me in a classroom environment. This class pushed me to explore online technology and find ways to utilize it.

Data analysis indicates that the greatest drawbacks of working on a group assignment were relying on others (40.4%), time management (21.2%), uneven contribution (17.3%) and uneven contribution (17.3%).

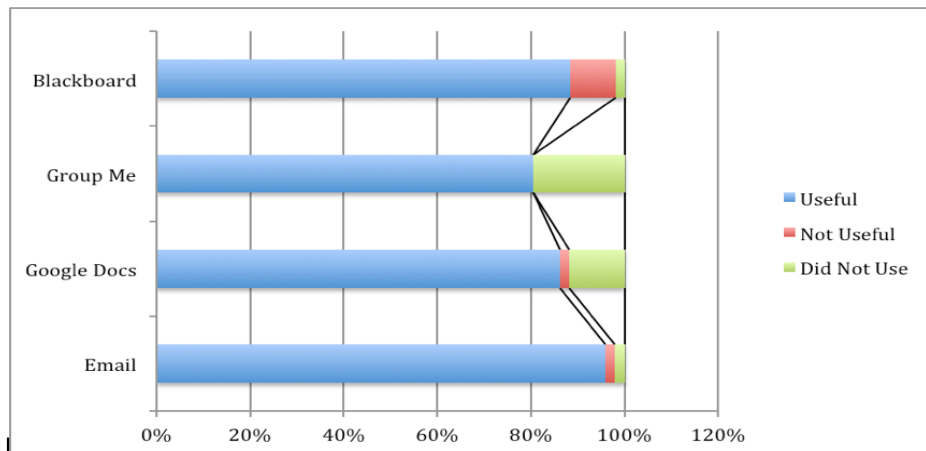
Chart 5. What do you think is the greatest drawback of working on a group assignment?



Poor attitude	0	0%
Poor commitment	8	15.4%
Rely on others	21	40.4%
Time management	11	21.2%
Uneven contribution	9	17.3%
No drawback	3	5.8%

Students' responses indicated the following tools were useful in communicating with each other: Blackboard Collaborate (88.5%), Email (96%), Google Docs (86.3%), and Group Me (80.4%).

Chart 6. What means did you use to communicate with each other?



Following are some of the comments participants made regarding the tools used in the course.

Working with a team environment has its advantages and its challenges, but the overall advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The technology, such as blackboard and Google docs, has made meeting online almost identical to meeting in person face-to-face. The advantage of time saved not having to travel to meet in person is unmatched. We have faced disadvantages due to scheduling conflicts and technological difficulties, but the differing schedules can't be to blame considering that meeting virtually is actually more convenient. Sometimes one can feel working with a group can hinder their progress while others enjoy being the beneficiary of work being done for them. Either way, working with a virtual team is a good experience to train one for the real world work environment.

By far, this has been the most thought-provoking class I've taken at VSU. Using class interaction via the blackboard virtual learning environment was a solution to not being face-to-face which was engaging and informative. I felt I learned so much more by hearing many different approaches to problem solving than just being taught the generally accepted, "best" way.

### **Discussion**

Overall the survey results showed that students enjoyed the experience of working in virtual teams. This study points to a number of critical issues about using virtual teams in online learning and raises questions for further study. Although teamwork and online teamwork are essential skills for graduates, the impact on student workloads can be excessive if the work is not monitored or scheduled appropriately. The stages of group development: forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965) take more time when online groups are involved. Teachers need to be aware of this when creating online projects. The issue of time is also important in another area. As the teacher's role shifts from being an instructor of knowledge to a facilitator, the teacher needs to be more accessible to students and this will usually require a contribution of added time (Fahraeus et. al, 1999). Frankola (2001) suggests that motivation, realistic expectations, highly integrated live sessions, and application of advanced technologies contribute to persistence in both the academic and corporate distance-learning environment.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlighted that learning and participating in a virtual team environment is a valued part of the student experience. Though these student projects were conducted in a virtual environment, students confirmed communication, accountability, and schedules were more important than technical concerns. While somewhat reassuring, this reinforces the instructor's responsibility to actively engage with and orient students when assigning project work in online classes. Cognitive engagement in online courses is highest when students feel a personal connection with their instructor and course content. Faculty must develop instructional skills that work best in the online environment so that students are engaged and connected with the instructor and their peers.

Further research should take into account variables such as:

- interactions with course interfaces
- course design and organization
- faculty characteristics and instructor expectations
- ongoing assessment linked to immediate feedback
- creating a sense of community
- students' motivation
- leadership styles

All are qualities that could contribute positively to the effectiveness of online learning. Dykman and Davis (2008) wrote "Teaching online is an exercise in continual incremental improvements." We need to explore what new and wonderful types of learning environments make learning effective for both online and face-to-face students.

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