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The Best of Both Worlds – The Hybrid Program

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Abstract

The special education teacher shortage in the United States is a critical issue and becoming a national crisis. Universities struggle to provide sufficient numbers of trained and licensed teachers to fill this need. These shortages are intensifying as modern universities also struggle with concepts of on-line learning and adult learning styles. The Hybrid Model developed at Regent University, incorporates the best components of the traditional classroom with those of the on-line learning environment, and provides a program resulting in the best of both worlds. This article describes one such model, its successes, and suggestions for on-going improvement.

Introduction

In the last few years, the shortage of teachers has resulted in many opting to participate in an on-the-job training experience to gain classroom experience instead of completing a student teaching placement. Current statistics estimate that as many as two million teachers will be needed during the next ten years (U.S. Department of Education Initiative to Ensure a Talented, Dedicated, and Well-Prepared Teacher in Every Classroom, 1999). Due to the teacher shortage, higher education is being challenged to provide quality teacher training in as short a period of time as possible in an effort to get qualified teachers in classrooms where they are badly needed.

The current teacher shortage in Special Education is a growing problem. In a recent survey report released by three education organizations, 98 percent of urban school districts have immediate needs for special education teachers (Kabugi, 2000). Teacher shortages in the area of Special Education are nothing new. In fact, because of these shortages, more than four out of five districts now allow non-credentialed individuals to teach special education (Kabugi, 2000). This shortage is projected to increase over the next few years as identified student populations increase while teacher populations are on the decline.

1

With these shortages as a backdrop, whenever our university had contact with school divisions they would ask us if we had any programs that could train their current teachers in the area of Special Education while they continued working, thus allowing teachers to accomplish licensure requirements. In response to this need and the growing teacher shortage, Regent University developed the Hybrid Cross-Categorical Special Education Program.

Program Design

The hybrid program was designed using the best components of three existing master's degree programs at Regent University. Those programs are:

- Cross-Categorical Special Education (Cross-Cat) -a traditional masters degree program that results in licensure;

- Master Teacher Program (MTP) - an intensive 10-month program that is geared towards working, licensed teachers who want to improve their skills and achieve a Masters - a focus on practical skill and in-person courses offered in a Thursday night, Friday night and Saturday format;

- Master Educator Program (MEP) - an on-line masters degree program that offers practical teacher skill improvement courses.

The Hybrid Cross-Categorical Special Education Program takes the content of the traditional special education program, mixes in the practical assignments designed for those who are currently teaching, and delivers 75-80 percent of the content online. The sequence of courses is designed to meet the needs of those who may be in classrooms on provisional licenses or who may enter the special education setting prior to completing the program. The courses on law, characteristics of special needs students and behavior management are initially offered to provide immediate skills and knowledge in the key areas needed early in the program. These classes provide a foundation in key areas for those inexperienced with the special needs population. Classes are held in-person approximately 7 times a semester, allowing full-time teachers the opportunity to attend. These in-person meetings result in cohorts of students living within about a hundred-mile radius.

Although program content is primarily the same as most traditional special education programs, it is tailored to meet the needs of the students in a specific geographic area. This allows teachers to focus on the areas of emphasis their districts are prioritizing. For example, when teaching special education law, there is an overview of federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and guidelines. Following the overview, the class focus turns to applying this information specifically to the special needs of the districts represented by the students in the class. One of our district speakers, for example, highlighted recent parental complaints of students losing class time due to early dismissals to buses and the district's responsibility by notifying teachers to discontinue early releases to buses. Guest

2

speakers from the community are utilized to highlight current national and local issues and needs, and provide training in how to complete specific forms (for child study teams, Individual Education Plans, documentation, etc.) from the districts in class. Thus, a marriage of the traditional information needed by all special educators with the practical orientation of what educators need to know to successfully teach within their specific district is achieved.

Assignments are also geared to the practical. Assignments for each class are authentic assessments that require application, synthesis, and analysis. In the Teaching and Assessing Reading and Math classes for example, program participants will practice the use of assessment with their students, utilize the results to improve instruction, and report back to their cohort on the results. This encourages constant reflection and on-going improvement and growth. Participants immediately see the value of what they are learning in class as they put it to use in their own classrooms.

Program Status

Preliminary feedback of the hybrid program was positive indicating initial success. At this stage, these indicators are informal, as the program is still in its early stages. Formal assessment will be done as the first cohort completes its program requirement in fall of 2001.

Student response to the program has been extremely encouraging. Though they feel they are working all the time, students realize this is a consequence of attending Master's level classes while working full-time. One student stated, "This program was rigorous yet extremely workable for teaching professionals because the assignments directly impacted my teaching practices during the year." Students feel that the practical nature of the assignments ties in nicely with what they are doing in their own classrooms. A student explained, "As a teacher, I would never have made it through this year without the practical guidance of this program." If they are writing a lesson plan or behavior plan for an assignment, they will often use this plan immediately in their own classrooms. "I feel the experiences this program has given me have better prepared me for the classroom than any lecture I had in my undergraduate work, and I've been teaching for six years." For example, while enhancing IEP (Individual Education Program) writing skills in the program, students can apply the strategies right away in writing an IEP the next week. Thus they satisfy the requirements for their assignments while they are completing a plan or an IEP to use with students in their professional setting. They often leave class on Saturday and try a new technique the very next week. The students feel this authentic use of their skills is one major benefit of the program. Students also respond positively to the use of "real world" speakers and team members. This allows them the opportunity to match educational theory with the requirements of their districts, schools, or individual students. It gives them the practical "real world" perspective that they indicate they did not find in many traditional Masters' programs. Even though they have a rigorous academic load, they feel that the coursework is valuable and immediately applicable. The on-line format also allows them the time to process information. "I notice that I

3

process the information better when it is presented on-line because I have to analyze it myself before I hear someone else's interpretation of what I am learning."

Students also respond positively to the hybrid mixture of the online and in-person classes. They indicate that having much of the traditional lecture type information presented online so they can view and respond to it as their schedules permit, is a very important component of the program. In addition, students are able to use the online discussion forums to share information and experiences, ask questions, and learn from their peers. Nationwide, online education is a trend that offers potential solutions to the concerns regarding distance (attendance because of travel issues or relocation), money (not being able to attend classes and work simultaneously), and time (time away from jobs, families, and other obligations) (Schrum, 1998).

The online formats of the classes appeal to adult learners who often learn more independently and construct their own meaning. Attitudes of online learners indicate they feel a greater sense of control and responsibility for their learning and the writing demands greater reflection than speaking (Schrum, 1998, quoting Harasim, 1999: Rohfeld & Hiemstra, 1994). Furthermore, constructivism, the theory that advocates a meaning-centered approach to learning and teaching, is readily modeled through asynchronous, online learning (Wilson & Lowry, 2000). Constructivism is listed as an attribute of a successful adult learning program according to many adult educators (Eastmond, 1998). Collaboration, interaction, application, democracy, and a sense of community, also characterize successful adult learning (Eastmond, 1998). Thus the online portion of the hybrid format supports important attributes of adult learning.

The authentic emphasis of the program also lends itself to project-based learning. Popular strategies regarding student thinking and learning show that both students and teachers enjoy project-based learning (Lamb, Smith, & Johnson, 1997). Information-rich in content, project-based learning blends traditional subject-matter goals with authentic learning environments and provides learners with opportunities to own, or master, information. Since these strategies are important as we teach our students, this same approach is utilized at Regent in the Hybrid program.

Research indicates the importance of community to the success of adult learners. Dr. Fred Rovai defines community as:

> One can define classroom community as a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, that they have duties and obligations to each other and to the school, and that they possess a shared faith that members' educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared goals (Rovai, 2001).

Dr. Rovai is currently doing research on the issue of community in traditional and online classrooms. The Hybrid Cross-Categorical Program participated in this research in the fall of 2000, and initial research indicates that students in the hybrid model exhibited a high sense of community. Further research needs to be done in this area, yet

4

initial results indicate that the mix of online and traditional in-person classes may result in increased community.

Conclusions

Research on adult learners indicates that many of the components exhibited in an online learning format including collaboration, interaction, application, democracy, a sense of community, and project-based learning are conducive to adult learning styles (Eastmond, 1998; Lamb, Smith, & Johnson, 1997; Rovai, 200l). This program combines what we know about adult learners and the benefits of distance education, with the benefits of in-person sessions to provide the opportunity to train special education teachers at an accelerated pace. The hybrid program continues to be adjusted and refined as it develops. Additionally, administrators in participating districts will be polled in an effort to utilize feedback and add specific components that may be important to the distinct geographic area of the students involved in the program. The following lessons have been learned through the implementation of the program:

1. The in-person component (cohort model) is important - allowing practical demonstrations, expert speakers, and authentic assessment of teacher skills.

2. Building community is an important part of any learning experience - but this is especially true with the online component of this model.

3. Acknowledging and utilizing professional and life skills of students (use what they already know) enhances growth and community.

4. Designing practical assignments that are immediately applicable is important to adult learners.

5. Being flexible - if the district, student, or current events require a change in plans to allow students to grow in an area not addressed in the syllabus - change the plan to meet the need.

6. Communicating with students regularly in order to measure student/district need is vital.

7. On-going assessment of the program to insure continuous improvement is essential.

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