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Preparing Teachers as Literacy Leaders in a Hybrid Classroom

Tamara Spencer

Fully online and hybrid courses (a combination of online and face-to-face learning) have become an increasingly common approach to higher education, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. With economic needs and the rise of digital technologies and communication, many colleges and universities have pursued these emergent forms of online education. Some researchers suggest that they result in the same or better learning outcomes (Bowen, Chingos, Lack, & Nygren, 2012) and increased access to more students at a reasonable cost, and that they improve the institution's financial stability (Fishman et al., 2013).

There are also critical considerations, as some note that institutional benefits are not being passed on to faculty, whose teaching loads and financial rewards are still based on traditional standards and criteria (Santilli & Beck, 2005). For teacher educators, online and hybrid courses pose particular challenges, as coursework often relies upon active participation, the demonstration of teaching practices, field based-experiences, and, in many cases, smaller class sizes.

Over my seven-year tenure at a large public university, my school has sought to expand online graduate programs and courses, identifying such measures as critical to the institution's long-term growth. Expanding course and program offerings to include online formats is described as an asset with a relatively lower cost and impact on the physical campus. As a result, the university has made great efforts to provide faculty with substantive professional development on online teaching and learning, many of which I have participated in over the years. Central to this professional development is the belief that Palloff & Pratt (1999) describe:

Electronic pedagogy is not just about fancy software packages or simple course conversion. It is about developing the skills involved with community building among a group of learners so as to maximize the benefits and potential that this medium holds in the educational area.
(p. 159)

My initial interest in trying out online and hybrid teaching came through my students. As an associate professor and the graduate program coordinator for the Masters in Reading, I regularly received inquiries from current and potential students about online and hybrid course offerings. In many cases, the students worked long hours during the day as classroom teachers and juggled evening graduate courses on campus, in addition to familial, economic, and personal obligations. They seemed deeply committed to their coursework and valued the academic and professional reputation of our program.

However, they struggled with the logistical demands and in some cases, worried that they would have to select a different university or seek out online coursework elsewhere to complete their degree.

I believe in a student-centered classroom—even with adult students—so I heard my students asking me how I might broaden my instructional approach to meet their needs and to reflect a broader societal shift in higher education. I ground my courses in both constructivist and culturally relevant pedagogy frameworks, and so I struggled to understand how such practices would translate into an online environment. In addition, while I am not a tech-troglydte, I would not identify as a “techie” either and I had never given much thought to what my courses would look like online.

In this article, I describe and analyze how I developed a course that I teach in hybrid format—50% online and 50% face-to-face teaching—*Literacy in the Elementary Grades*. First, I draw upon two overlapping frameworks in literacy studies—sociocultural theory and new literacy studies—to describe the broader theoretical framework that grounds both the course design and the approach to literacy taken with the course. From there, I provide a detailed analysis of the course, the objectives, overall content and assignments, and how I modified the course to be hybrid.

I detail key aspects of the hybrid course that include: virtual groups and office hours, online tasks, group presentations and protocols, discussions, and tools. I then engage in an analysis and note several key observations and ways that online sessions and face-to-face sessions varied significantly in terms of group dynamics and discussions, the ways that course content expanded and shifted as online space afforded both myself and students “wiggle room,” and the way that students’ engagement with each other varied, depending on the nature of our work and the types of tools we used.

Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy Learning

How I design my courses and choose content is informed by sociocultural perspectives on teaching and learning. Fundamentally, I ground my work in a *literacy as social practices* framework, a perspective that considers the authentic and purposeful ways in which people engage in literacy practices in their everyday lives. Such a perspective avoids a singular definition of literacy and instead requires educators to broaden their own teaching practices, as literacy knowledge is positioned as nuanced and varied.

I also ground my work in the principle of multimodal literacy practices “in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). Harste (2003) argues that the meaning-making that grounds twenty-first-century language and literacy learning has expanded, not only in the form of reading and writing, but in the form of visual-text literacies.

While this theory has always been visible in the ways that I understood and taught K-12 literacy learning—encouraging educators to broaden what “counts” as text—it was less clear how such a theory might be directly connected to my own teaching. In fact, each semester, I found myself more perplexed as my students’ use of smartphones and computers increased, despite disclaimers on my syllabi

and reminders throughout the semester that such practices were distracting. Moreover, they did so brazenly and nimbly, participating in class as they searched for content on computers to expand our discussion or texting each other notes about a project in small group discussions. Perry (2012) asserts:

Multiliteracies scholars do not reject print literacy, but they view it as only one form of representation and meaning-making among many—one that has been, and continues to be, privileged above other forms in schooling. (p.59)

With irony staring me squarely in the eyes, I decided to rethink the content and delivery of my course in a way that would build upon the literacy practices that my students were bringing with them into the undergraduate and graduate classroom. However, before I could do that, I needed to revisit my key goals for them as future teachers.

Before deciding which of my courses I would move to online instruction, I needed to consider the principles that ground my beliefs and how to best prepare literacy teachers. Long ago, I understood constructivist principles to be most conducive to my work in classrooms. Specifically, learning happens within social contexts, as the zone between learner and teacher is dynamically drawn and re-drawn through shared experiences (Vygotsky, 1962). As Rovai explains (2004):

The implications of constructivism for a learning environment include using curricula customized to the students' prior knowledge, the tailoring of teaching strategies to student backgrounds and responses, and employing open-ended questions that promote extensive dialogue among learners. (p. 81)

Rogoff (1988) argues that learning within a sociocultural and constructivist framework is a collaborative process, yet collaboration doesn't have to be face-to-face. At the time, she argued that it could include endeavors such as letter writing and joint authoring. My hybrid and online teaching would need to somehow overlay a constructivist framework with emergent online teaching technologies. I would have to build a learning community that was grounded in shared experiences and circumstances in which our physical bodies were not always present.

Given the heightened attention on hybrid and online teaching, my university offered a variety of professional development opportunities and I took advantage of them. As a result, I developed an introductory understanding of our school's online course management system and the range of virtual learning environments, and learned how to decide if one's course should be synchronous or asynchronous. Consequently, I homed in on *Literacy in the Elementary Grades*, the second in a two-part undergraduate course sequence in which prospective elementary teachers explore key theories and methods for teaching literacy, with an emphasis on the intermediate grades. The following sections demonstrate how I moved this course from a face-to-face syllabus to a hybrid one.

From Face-to-face to Hybrid

Deciding to use *Literacy in the Elementary Grades* as the course for my first online experience was tactical. First, I had taught this course more than any other in my tenure and I was a lead architect in a content redesign of the course a few years earlier. I also chose it because I knew the content well. I had taught it both in a traditional semester sequence and in a more intensive summer schedule so I knew that the course was malleable. That is, assuming students were responsibly and regularly attending and participating, we could achieve our goals and objectives in a variety of ways.

Course Format

The first decision I made, in terms of my online teaching, was to offer the course during a four-week summer session. The schedule required students to attend class for long stretches of time, several times a week. I also chose a hybrid schedule, so that in any given week we would only meet one to two times and the remaining sessions would occur online. This is distinctly different from a traditional semester hybrid course, where there might be several weeks between face-to-face meetings. While content moved quickly, I wanted to ensure that there was never too much time between our face-to-face sessions.

Structurally, the next major decision I made was to offer the online sessions asynchronously, meaning we did not have to be present online during our scheduled meeting time. While my professional development included software programs that would allow for us all to interface and participate at the same time, I felt that these programs were not only glitchy but more compatible with a didactic or teacher-directed pedagogy. Thus, an essential realization included an understanding that the online technologies had to align with the face-to-face constructivist pedagogies that undergird my teaching.

Much like a K-12 classroom, in any given class period, my course time is divided so that there are ample opportunities for students to engage in whole class, small group and one-to-one interactions. In applying constructivist pedagogies to an online environment, I needed to consider how these principles would translate. That is, I needed to choose “technological tools” that built most naturally on our face-to-face practices—in other words, avoiding a technology-for-technology’s sake mindset. Table 1 outlines the technological tools and their uses for different types of interaction in our online environment.

Table 1. Online Tools for Different Types of Class Participation

Instructional Configuration	Online Tools	Use
Whole Class Participation	University Virtual Environment Platform	Holds all course documents, session assignments, and announcements
	Discussion board	A place for posting questions or video responses for all students to ponder
	Session agenda	A dedicated link that provides a checklist for session activities and experiences
	Ask the Professor	A dedicated “space” in the virtual classroom to “raise your hand” and ask questions that all students can see
Small Group Participation	Group discussion board	A space for groups to answer focused questions, share ideas, and plan content
	GoogleDocs	A platform for creating shared documents and inviting others to collaborate or read
	Google email	To see when others are online and to use group chat feature and pages
One-to-one Participation	Google chat or face time	For office hours and to communicate with classmates

Choosing Content for Online and Face-to-face Contexts

My courses are grounded in sociocultural perspectives in literacy and a culturally responsive teaching framework (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Prior to designing the schedule of online and face-to-face sessions, I made the baseline decision that certain conversations lent themselves better to online conversations than others. For example, early in the semester, we read Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman’s (2007) work that complicates the longstanding notion of a “literacy achievement gap.”

The authors acknowledge an “achievement gap” that warrants attention and concern. That is, data reveals that children from poverty backgrounds score significantly lower in literacy assessments than

those from middle- and high-income backgrounds and that this gap also correlates between African-American and Latino students and their respective White peers. However, Teale et al. (2007) critique the notion of an “achievement gap” in the absence of a conversation about the huge “curriculum gap” in U.S. schools. Rather, a standardized-testing culture, coupled with curricular policies that privilege reductive interpretations of basic reading and writing, create classrooms that lack rich comprehension, content area, and writing instruction.

While the Teale et al. (2007) article focuses on standardized testing, in my experience, students tended to focus on deficits and presumptions about urban families and home literacy practices. As such, our face-to-face conversation required a tremendous amount of questioning, pausing, redirection, reflecting, and reconsidering of content. While it is possible to engage in this type of conversation online, it is more difficult because you are unable to read body language, gauge feelings, notice silence, and react in real time.

However, there were other instances when I found that conversations readily translated to online spaces. For example, one assignment in the course requires students to participate in a group project, teaching and demonstrating a reading comprehension strategy to their classmates. When I teach this course face-to-face, I find that most students give PowerPoint presentations that are closely connected to the course readings and they rarely veer off this script.

When I teach the course in hybrid format, I require students to create a multi-author presentation (e.g., a Google doc) and embed videos, images, content links, and demonstration videos of themselves teaching others to use this strategy. While this is initially daunting, the assignment invariably generates higher quality work than the traditional assignment during a face-to-face course. For example, students embed videos of themselves modeling reading practices, sharing self-histories of their own struggles learning to read/write, or act out humorous parodies that apply popular culture references to our course content.

Student evaluations regularly reveal that the assignment taught them a lot about multiple-author writing tasks, technology, and the actual content--reading comprehension. In addition, as the instructor, the students always add me to the shared document as an author. As a result, I have the opportunity to witness their learning process through tools like document history, text chat-features, and group meetings. This insight into student learning is rarely afforded in a traditional classroom group assignment.

Opportunities Afforded by a Variant Course Model

One of the biggest surprises that emerged from teaching the course in hybrid format was the rich community that we were able to create, despite the difference in face-to-face time. Each semester, I revealed to my students that I was learning the technology for this course alongside them. Therefore, students regularly saw me take a learner stance—calling University Technology Services when I did not know the answer to a question, making mistakes here and there, face-timing at all hours of the

day from our respective homes—a perspective that complicates the traditional professor/student relationship. As a result, the students saw me make mistakes, reveal gaps in knowledge, and engage with new technological content willingly. Because of this model, the students took up these same practices more readily. However, students did not distinguish between the content of their inquiries—their communication and questioning extended beyond technology into the content of the course, their professional ambitions and work, and general and personal experiences.

For example, in one exchange on the differences between phonemic awareness and phonics—linguistic components of oral and written language—the students shifted this conversation to one on the content of their standardized tests (the PRAXIS exams), which included these topics. They noted how such topics appeared on the test, but they were also quick to note that such exams failed to assess other theories and perspectives in literacy.

This is not to say that this type of community doesn't exist in my traditional courses; however, there does seem to be a different tone than in others I have taught. The conversation extended for several threads and students provided links to each other to explain information—interactions that would be less likely within the already time-stretched agenda of a weekly face-to-face session. I also feel that students learned more about me, through open access to my online social networks (e.g., Google platforms, Facebook). For example, my social media platform reveals images of my family, the types of ways that I spend my leisure time, musical taste, etc.—information that is less likely to arise in a traditional course.

Another way that we build community is through our critical friend groups. During online sessions, students are directed into group conversations with the same peers and while not required, they tend to sit with each other in the face-to-face meetings as well. I have found that students are comfortable engaging deeply with course content and readings in these groups. Because writing and communication online is fully visible, I find that I “hear” a more diverse range of voices in online sessions. In addition, students seem more willing to challenge each other's perspectives and/or raise questions in response to what another has said. For example, students use language like “I disagree...”, “Where did it say that?” or “Could you say more about that point?” in their online writing. One hypothesis is that they do not want to appear as if they are expressing the same point as a previous poster. Or perhaps the communication practices of online spaces differ from those within a physical classroom community. As the professor, I find it easier to step back and watch the students lead each other through critical or challenging conversations online than it is face-to-face when some students invariably talk more than others and discussion questions are redirected towards me, whether this is my desire or not. Online, I can watch and wait for others to chime in, one of the affordances of an asynchronous class session where the notion of “class time” varies.

Tensions that a Hybrid Course Presents

I have emphasized many of the benefits associated with moving *Literacy in the Elementary Grades* into

a hybrid framework; however, this type of teaching also poses unique challenges. In face-to-face sessions, the vast majority of our conversations involve oral communication, which includes gesture, intonation, expression, and situates context and discourse communities (Gee, 1996). However, online teaching involves significantly less oral communication. Rovai (2007) argues:

The defining characteristic of an online constructivist learning environment is discourse, typically in the form of online discussions. Discussion provides learners with opportunities to write, and in doing so, reflect on course content and previous postings by members of the learning community. (p. 78)

If discourse is central to a constructivist online learning environment, online communication and what it looked like in my course required serious thought. Therefore, I built on Rovai's principle and also made the discourse practices of our online writing communities explicit. For example, students initially would respond to a question in formal prose, respond in multiple paragraph form, and cite readings to support their ideas. These practices are commonplace in academic writing; however they generate less dialogue and are difficult to translate into authentic communication practices online. Large blocks or quotes and citations typically led to less commentary or online discussion.

Therefore, in our first session, I explained (and modeled) to students, that posts should speak to ideas that were of interest to them, complicated, and/or worthy of further discussion. Posts were not an assessments of their summarizing skills but instead, responses should be a place for them to raise issues publicly and look to see how others are responding to selected texts and engage in conversations accordingly. I spent a significant amount of time in the semester talking to students about how we respond and raise questions during our online sessions. I'd end my posts with informal expressions: "What do ya think?" "Others?" "Thoughts?" I hoped that students might see how my own vernacular varied in our online discussions.

In addition, we would engage in face-to-face practices that addressed discourse, studying the ways that we communicated and attempted to translate communicative tendencies into online platforms. For example, I would ask the students to analyze a conversation we had online and discuss why they thought the conversation went well. I would also encourage the use of visual representations of knowledge or links to additional web resources to respond to each other.

Often, students would point out resources online that had practical use. At times, these links would demonstrate the multilayered experience we were having face-to-face and through more typical, informal online tools, as in the example below, where a student shared a lolcat image (imgflip, 2015). He built on the group discussion of phonemic awareness and phonics. His post was playful, yet also a recognition of the hybridity of the learning experience in the course, adapting online discussion tools to suit our intellectual needs in the course.

If discourse is the heart of constructivist teaching (in online communities), as Rovai notes, then our discussions very much built on our experiences, the communication norms and content we valued, and the available forms of discussion that our hybrid class provided.

And yet, the online format could not supplement a number of meaningful in-person practices. For example, children’s literature and artifacts from elementary classroom practice weigh heavily in my face-to-face teaching, and are more difficult to bring into online teaching. Children’s literature—specifically, picture books—provide a powerful space for authentic communication and inquiry in graduate courses, and require a type of communicative multimodal inquiry that is lost online.

It is nearly impossible to pour over a book’s images “together” online. In addition, when it comes to actual examples of children’s writing or artifacts from classrooms, these too involve a degree of physicality that lacks substance when I attempt to mirror them online. Moreover, my own ability to model the instructional practices that might accompany such materials—i.e., participating in a “read-aloud” or a writing workshop lesson—is reduced when I attempt to replicate them in online spaces. For example, providing a video of myself reading a text or even pointing to a read-aloud of a text on YouTube does not compare to the shared reading experience we might have in a face-to-face class.

Other resources do readily translate to the hybrid format. Chapter books, online texts (for children), and video clips from classrooms all translate effectively and provide additional evidence to support online discussions and assignments. In terms of online materials, students were also more likely to cite the work of other teachers—lesson plans, classroom websites, Pinterest pages, blogs—in their discussions online.

Over the course of a semester, our understanding of technology and our own learning were powerful and collective. My students and I collectively commented on our growth and were able to engage in metacognitive practices that provided an analysis of our development as learners. And yet, students were far less likely to see how such practices might translate into everyday K-6 teaching practices. Rather, literacy pedagogies in schools continue to privilege traditional notions of print and text.

Marsh (2007) argues convincingly that, “Because of the range of learning opportunities presented by digital technologies, new pedagogical approaches are needed in schools if the curriculum is to be sufficiently engaging and appropriate for children and young people” (p. 267). When students did mention technology in classrooms, the conversations tended to emphasize software or the use of iPad apps; however, as Lankshear & Knobel (2006) note, technology in today’s classrooms requires an entirely new worldview. As such, considerations of how we might use technology in classrooms complicate not just how we think of technology and children, but our beliefs about literacy as a whole.

Conclusion

As I reflect upon my experience translating *Literacy in the Elementary Grades* into a hybrid course, I see great benefits beyond the economic benefits of hybrid or online courses in university settings. How-

ever, being committed to new literacies is not enough. As Millis (2010) states,

Application and execution . . . remain key issues for faculty. Even faculty who are philosophically committed to the new paradigms often lack the know-how to successfully adapt the teaching techniques and classroom management practices that can lead to more learning-oriented approaches. (p. 1)

Thus, one critical factor to my future success as an online educator is a need for ongoing professional support on these tools and technologies. Karchmer-Klein & Shinas (2012) note: “One can never know everything there is to know about technology. Instead, we encourage you to focus your efforts on your own professional development by maintaining a finger on the pulse of technological advancements” (p. 288). Indeed, it was this type of intellectual curiosity that first brought me to teach in online settings. However, it was equally my commitment to using a constructivist framework.

A principle assumption of my teaching is the belief that I have to build upon the knowledge and resources that my students demonstrate in our classroom. As the number of online and/or hybrid learning options increase, so does the importance of considering practices that mirror high-quality, student-centered, and authentic learning practices in these emergent technology settings. As I look to future online teaching, I would like to continue to engage students in critical conversations about how we might better align their students’ multiliteracies and technologies with their work in K-12 schools.

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