

Considering the Virtual Classroom: A Call to Middle Level Education Programs

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Abstract

Today's classrooms are changing and moving beyond the walls of a traditional school environment. With each passing year, a growing population of middle level learners are logging into full-time or blended learning virtual courses. However, teachers often lack the training and experience necessary to address the developmental needs of middle level learners within this new context. Highlighting the realities of the 21st century classroom, the author urges us to consider our post-secondary education programs and the manner in which we prepare our teacher candidates to teach middle level learners within a virtual platform.

INTRODUCTION

"This will be my first time in a classroom," exclaimed Amy (a pseudonym), one of my middle school methods students, as we walked together through the halls of a local middle school.

"You mean it will be your first time *teaching* in a classroom?" I inquired.

"No, I mean, my first time *in* a classroom," she replied as we proceeded through the doors of the library.

As we found a seat at a nearby table, I paused to make sense of the situation. "You mean this course is your first time in a middle school classroom?" I was completely confused. How was this her first time in a classroom environment?

"Yes!" Amy smiled. "This is my first time in *any* classroom – well, aside from my college courses."

Some of her classmates, who were already awaiting the start of our class session, diverted attention from their own discussions, and turned to join our conversation.

"What do you mean?" questioned another student. "How is this your first time in a classroom?"

"Well," Amy started, "I attended virtual school my whole life."

"Wow!" another student exclaimed. "You mean you've been in virtual school since kindergarten?!"

"Yep!" she shared. "And, I loved it! In fact, I'm hoping to become a virtual teacher! I had a couple great virtual teachers in the past, and they helped lead me towards a career in teaching. So, I'm hoping to graduate and find a job with an online school."

As I listened to her share more of her experiences, and further embellish upon her goal of moving into the field of virtual education, my mind swarmed with questions, concerns, insights, and excitement. As a fledgling researcher, I wanted so badly to sit with her, hear her stories, and share her experience with others in the field of education. As a doctoral student, I considered the ramifications of her experience in terms of her undergraduate education and preparation for the classroom. And, as a former middle schools teacher, and novice virtual instructor myself, I reflected on my own experiences transitioning from classroom teacher to online educator.

All in all, I wondered, *what could this mean for the preparation of future middle school teachers?*

Enter the Virtual Middle Level Classroom

I was a middle school teacher for 10 years before making the decision to leave the traditional classroom behind, and navigate the waters of virtual teaching in an effort to complete my doctoral dissertation study. Yet, despite my review of virtual education literature, self-study regarding online teaching, and personal experience within the ninth-grade virtual classroom, it was not until my discussion with Amy in the library of a Title I middle school that I realized the true magnitude and widespread growth of virtual middle level education. Yes, I was aware that more and more students were electing to take virtual courses in lieu of traditional classroom courses at the middle and secondary level. However, for some reason, I thought of virtual education as a recent development – a modern trend in the world of education. It never occurred to me that a junior within the undergraduate education program at my post-secondary institution would have her very first classroom experience within the field work of our undergraduate program of study.

The reality is, the 21st century classroom is unlike anything we have experienced before. Virtual instruction is now one of the fastest growing forms of school choice (National Education Policy Center [NEPC], 2014). Students are signing up to take courses in a variety of virtual formats: blended learning, part-time, and full-time virtual instruction. Blended learning environments provide a combination of online and face-to-face instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In part-time programs, students receive supplemental or credit recovery in the virtual setting, along with enrollment in traditional face-to-face or homeschool programs. Full-time programs provide students an option outside of the brick-and-mortar setting as they receive their entire curriculum online.

As of 2014, there are more than 300 full-time virtual schools enrolling more than 200,000 students throughout the United States. In addition to the 30 states that allow full-time

virtual schools in operation, even more states allow courses to be delivered online in a hybrid format for public school students (NEPC, 2014). In fact, some states, such as Florida, now require that students take virtual courses as a component of their public school education in order to meet public school graduation requirements (Florida Legislature, 2013). For the 2014-2015 school year, state virtual courses served over 462,000 students (Evergreen Education Group, 2015). Altogether, researchers estimate more than two million K-12 students are taking some form of online school, district, or state course during the 2015-2016 school year (Evergreen Education Group).

A growing portion of students enrolling in virtual courses are middle level students. As of 2015, middle level (grades 6 through 8) students represent 14% of learners taking virtual courses to supplement their current coursework and 28% of full-time virtual school students (Evergreen Education Group, 2015).

Addressing adolescent needs in the virtual setting. As I listened to Amy share stories of her virtual learning experience, I reflected on my own teacher preparation experience, and my time as a virtual teacher. When I graduated with my undergraduate degree in Education in 2002, there was no focus on preparing educators for a virtual classroom. In fact, it was not until I began work as a virtual teacher that the notion of virtual teacher preparation entered my mind. Though I had only been teaching in the virtual capacity for eight months, I had already witnessed multiple ways in which the virtual environment did not fit the needs of the adolescent learner. Middle level learners were often limited to independent work and interactions with only the teacher. In fact, the structure of our particular institution often limited social interactions, as students worked in an asynchronous manner throughout the course, thereby limiting the ability to address adolescent needs for social engagement and dialogue (Eisenbach, 2015). In addition, the curriculum was rigid, and lacked flexibility to differentiate based on student interests and individual needs.

The prescribed curriculum was pre-loaded for students, and did not provide the wiggle room I would have liked to see in addressing student need for autonomy (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004). Students were often disengaged (Eisenbach), as the structure of the virtual learning experience limited their ability to enhance their personal motivation through what Ryan and Deci (2000) address as self-determination theory, or a need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. I often questioned how such a program was addressing the basic developmental needs of my middle level learners, and how I could be expected to meet those needs given the stringent expectations of my position.

Students enrolling in today's virtual courses do so for a variety of reasons. Whether it's to fulfill a graduation requirement, recover a prior course credit, take a course not otherwise offered within the public school setting, or to simply get ahead in one's studies, some middle level students log into virtual courses to get ahead in their education. Others find themselves taking virtual courses for more personal reasons. Some students find that virtual education benefits their individual behavioral, emotional, or physical needs. For instance, as a virtual educator, I worked with middle level learners who were concurrently enrolled in a behavioral treatment facility, detention facilities, and those seeking medical care for physical conditions. Other students would opt to take virtual classes so they could pursue personal passions and interests (Evergreen Education Group, 2015).

Our change in educational context does not in itself change the basic nature of our middle level students. If anything, the current growth of online education lends itself to the need for online classrooms and virtual educators prepared to foster student motivation, autonomy, active social peer engagement, achievement beliefs, and sense of self-efficacy. The diversity within the online classroom calls for attention to addressing the unique needs of middle level virtual learner by "requiring a re-examination of the roles teachers take in

enhancing students' learning" (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011, p. 429). How might our teacher preparation programs assist us in addressing this need?

A Need for Virtual Teacher Education

As discussion seemed to dwindle down, and students began turning back to their prior conversations, I approached Amy with a question of my own. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," she responded.

"You mentioned that you are anticipating a career in virtual education. So, first, I'm wondering, have you at all considered teaching in a traditional setting?"

She thought a moment, then responded. "Well, sort of. I mean, I feel like this program has really helped me to learn more about teaching in a traditional environment. But," she paused, "I'm worried about my ability to really put it all to use, and to manage an actual classroom environment. I mean, I'm eager to see what happens when I get up in front of an actual classroom and try to teach. But my experience has always been virtual, so I feel like I might be better equipped to teach online."

Again, I considered my own experience, and the vast differences I encountered in teaching and managing a traditional middle level classroom and a virtual classroom environment. Lortie (1975) addresses the apprenticeship of observation – our tendency as educators to call upon our experience as students when teaching. As novice teachers, it is common to rely on our experiences as students in guiding our decisions and instruction within the classroom (Winstead, 2007). Amy's educational background provided her a wealth of experience with regards to virtual education, and no experience – outside of her undergraduate coursework and field placements – within a traditional setting. However, my experience with virtual classrooms was limited to brief experiences within my undergraduate and graduate education programs. As a primary,

middle, and secondary learner, I was instructed within a traditional classroom. Despite having earned my bachelor of arts in English Education, master degree in Reading Education, my active status within a doctoral education program, and 10 years of middle school teaching experience, I still struggled in various ways to find my footing within the online context. I often wondered, *if I had a stronger foundation, or experience, in virtual instructional theory and practice, would I have had an easier time transitioning into my new role? Would my students have benefited from the enhanced background in middle level educational theory and practice with specific attention to virtual pedagogy?*

While the majority of skills and approaches virtual teachers need to navigate the online classroom are the same as those connected to effective traditional teaching, the demanding pace of technological change, the need to integrate new approaches to instruction, and the need to differentiate to diverse student profiles is higher in virtual environments (Powell, Rabbitt & Kennedy, 2014). Virtual teachers need to be able to understand and manage the online components of lesson planning and organizing a virtual course. They must also understand how to balance asynchronous and synchronous modalities, troubleshoot potential technical difficulties, and demonstrate effective strategies for gathering and evaluating data regarding student progress. In addition, they need to understand ways to cultivate a positive relationship with students and families they may never meet in person (Powell et al.). They must find ways to establish a sense of immediacy, as well as a social and teacher presence to further encourage student motivation and classroom engagement (Eisenbach, 2015).

Research demonstrates that teachers who move from a traditional setting to the online classroom face challenges in finding their re-envisioned teacher-self. They maintain their original apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975), but find themselves attempting to enact this experience within a new context. While virtual teachers have a tendency to rely on their

traditional teaching experience and training as reference points, the virtual classroom poses new challenges as they instruct within their existing philosophy and practices regarding education (Baran et al., 2011). It is not uncommon for virtual teachers to feel unprepared to meet the daily challenges and expectations of online teaching. They often lack the tools and preparation necessary to establish the teacher identity and practice they once utilized within the brick-and-mortar environment (Baran et al.).

Considering teacher preparation and experience. In considering the number of teachers transitioning to the online classroom with limited, or no experience in virtual education, it is also important to keep in mind the ever-growing population of students gaining a full-time education through virtual channels. Giving attention to Amy's experience, it is interesting to consider that a population of future teachers will approach our middle level teacher education programs with limited experience in the traditional classroom setting. With regards to my own transition into the virtual classroom, and the growing need for virtual teachers to fill the vacancies of an ever-expanding online institution, it is apparent that some of our pre-service middle level teachers will select a career in some form of virtual education. In either case, the limitations of experience will weigh heavily on the need for theory and application within our middle level preparation programs.

When virtual teachers fall short of online classroom experience, they often rely on the skills and pedagogical strategies acquired in the traditional classroom and within their teacher preparation programs to guide their virtual classroom instruction (Baran et al., 2011). Researchers have noted how carrying traditional practices into the virtual classroom can limit elements of progress for virtual learners (Baran et al.; Kreber & Kanuka, 2006). The two platforms do not always translate in the way we might hope.

Teaching is the art of combining content knowledge with an understanding of student development and pedagogical understanding to effectively engage and address a vast array of learner's unique needs. With the ever-growing world of virtual education, and the specific needs of middle level learners, it is reasonable that pre-service teachers should receive training and practical experience using the tools, pedagogy, and theory required of successful teaching and learning in the virtual environment (Kennedy & Archambault, 2013). As such, it is time for teacher preparation programs to embrace the reality of virtual education, continue our research and development regarding effective means of meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of adolescent learners within the online context, and modernize our focus to prepare future teachers for the possibility of virtual teaching.

A call to teacher education programs.

The ever growing role of online education is forcing colleges of education to re-evaluate their own ideologies and pedagogical structures (Baran et al., 2011). As of 2012, only 1.3% of teacher education programs in the US incorporated coursework and/or field experiences regarding virtual education instruction within their programs of study (Kennedy & Archambault, 2013). Of those programs, the majority focused their attention within their graduate studies, or through online teaching endorsement programs with limited attention on undergraduate virtual teacher preparation. However, many of today's public middle school classrooms embrace virtual education through hybrid, or blended learning environments (Evergreen Education Group, 2015). Novice teachers who elect to teach within the traditional middle school classroom will still require skills necessary for effective virtual instruction within blended learning environments (Kennedy & Archambault). An important part of helping our future teachers achieve success within the online, or hybrid classroom, is for our post-secondary education programs to provide coursework and relevant field experiences that allow teacher candidates

to develop online pedagogical skills prior to entering the virtual classroom (Kennedy & Archambault).

Today's middle level learners approach the classroom – despite the platform – with a host of unique, developmental needs. We want to prepare our pre-service teachers for virtual teaching “so that they know what to expect and how to establish their online teacher persona through online pedagogies, and also develop positive attitudes towards online teaching” (Baran et al., 2011, p. 436). Our teachers should be prepared to address the needs of today's middle level students within both the traditional and virtual setting. By finding ways to effectively infuse virtual educational theory, practice, and field experience into our preparation programs, we can further assist our pre-service teachers in preparing for whichever reality awaits them in such a way that they are ready to face the challenge, and meet the needs of their diverse middle level learners. ❖

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