

Teaching Social Studies Online: An Exemplar for Examining the Broader Implications of Online Methods Courses in Teacher Education

Christina M. Tschida

Assistant Professor

Department of Elementary and Middle Grades

East Carolina University

Greenville, NC 27858 USA

tschidac@ecu.edu

Brian R. Sevier

Standards Project Director

Colorado Department of Education

Denver, CO 80203 USA

sevier_b@cde.state.co.us

Abstract

The authors use experiences with an elementary social studies methods course to create dialogic conversations about the issues and challenges faced as they taught the class for the first time in an online format. In dialogues, the authors raise questions about the impact of online methods on classroom community, the significance of modeling practices in teacher education, and the status of social studies in teacher education. These questions are pertinent to and compelling for larger discussions of online delivery across the content spectrum. Indeed, the authors contend that the range of issues surrounding online social studies methods and this content area's particular vulnerabilities make the course an appropriate and convincing case study for the future of all methods courses, particularly within the context of the current accountability-obsessed educational setting.

Keywords: online learning, teacher education, methods courses, sense of community, autoethnography, self-study

Introduction

Congruent with today's computing advancements, the rise of telecommuters, the expansion (and promotion) of social networking, and the proliferation of virtual communities, we have seen enormous growth in the number and scope of online classes in academia. In fact, the "explosive growth of distance education is transforming post-secondary education" (Moller, Foshay, & Huett, 2008, p. 66). In addition to this contemporary technological context, the budgetary crises affecting the fiscal lives of institutions of higher education across the country make online courses difficult to resist. Colleges and universities see distance education as an effective means for sustaining growth (Moller et al., 2008; Young & Lewis, 2008). There is also growing evidence of the cost-effectiveness of online learning as courses can be developed, copied, and reused by other instructors, allowing for significant cost efficiencies and, to some extent, quality control (Wise & Rothman, 2010). Providing coursework online is not only cost-effective from physical plant and faculty resource perspectives, it also offers flexibility with inherent recruiting and retention potential. Accordingly, students whose lifestyles or life responsibilities do not match well with traditional college schedules might be more willing or able to attend and complete a program with built-in online courses (Ke, 2010; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leindhardt, 2006; Young & Lewis, 2008). Given these realities it is likely not too big a stretch to assert that online courses are here to stay; the number of these courses will no doubt increase exponentially in years to come. Schools of education, like their counterparts across the university, are adding online courses in ever-increasing amounts (Curle & Jamieson, 2011). Indeed, the authors of this paper (hereinafter referred to by their initials, CMT and

BRS), are currently involved in teaching and/or evaluating elementary social studies methods or general teacher education online courses.

The authors use the online social studies methods classes that they have taught for the last two years to advance a conversation about these courses and the questions they raise for teacher education in general. They contend that the range of issues surrounding online social studies methods and this content area's particular vulnerabilities make the course an appropriate and compelling case study for methods courses across the content spectrum.

Scholarship considering the impact of web-based coursework is burgeoning contemporaneously with the online enterprise in higher education. It is not that online courses cannot provide effective means for the delivery of content or for creating learning environments. There is a growing body of research dedicated to improving and effectively utilizing online formats to advance these instructional goals (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Barbour, 2010; Carlson et al., 2012; Desai, Hart, & Richards, 2009; Johnson, 2005; Milhelm, 2012; Yang, Olesova, & Richardson, 2010; Young, 2006). Given the aims here, however, the authors frame this paper within the cautionary aspects of online literature and within current writing on the threats to teacher education in today's educational milieu. The authors do not dismiss or disregard online instructional potential, but raise questions about the implications of online instruction for the broader enterprise of teacher education.

The context of schools of education where the authors work provides grounding for this discussion. BRS has moved to a position in a state department of education; however, during the research for and writing of this paper, he was an associate professor of social studies education at a university in central North Carolina dedicated to pursuing and expanding their online teacher education courses. CMT is currently an assistant professor of social studies education at the leading online teacher education provider in North Carolina and the 12th largest provider (among traditional universities) in the country. Her university provides both online and face-to-face (F2F) formats of all methods courses and offers many teacher education programs solely online.

Context, Methods, and Questions

The online social studies course examined herein was divided into week(s)-long modules. The class is structured around the use of various technologies (including [Blackboard](#), [Camtasia](#), [VoiceThread](#), [Prezi](#), etc.) for content delivery and learning assessment. It contains various materials and technologies to engage students with the content and teaching strategies (e.g., theoretical and content background readings, activities, discussion boards, videos). Demographically, the students in both programs reflected the typical makeup of elementary teacher education candidate pools: The majority were female, Anglo-Saxon, and largely from middle class familial backgrounds (Seidl, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

This examination of the authors' teaching falls under the umbrella of teacher education self-study and builds upon the beliefs and assumptions of a growing body of scholarship (Adler, 1993; Freese, 2006; Lewis, 2004; Richardson, 1996; Zeichner, 1995, 2006). Specifically, the authors connect this work with self-studies that evince the reflective practices of teacher educators (Dinkelman, 2003), that illuminate pedagogical aspirations and shortcomings (Doecke, 2006; Sevier, 2002), and that provide insight into institutional realities and change efforts in the landscapes of teacher education (Beck & Shanks, 2005; Bullock & Freedman, 2006; Candlinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Feldman, 2003; Sockman & Sharma, 2008).

The particular methodological approach to this self-study, *autoethnography*, uses teacher narratives (our stories) constructed to analyze the authors' experiences and conversations around online education. This means of inquiry maintains that narrative cannot be separated from the researchers' lived-lives (Lyle, 2009). Indeed, autoethnography foregrounds narrative as the way in which researchers can revisit significant, generative, and influential life experiences. The actual writing of the narrative(s) in autoethnography, in fact, is the process that uncovers the data to be analyzed (Jones, 2005; Lyle, 2009; Richardson, 2000). In other words, autoethnographers write what they seek to understand into the stories and/or dialogue to be examined (Poulos, 2009; Richardson, 2000). The authors began this process by creating retrospective individual narratives based on papers and/or journal entries centered on their experiences with online teacher education (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). They then used these individual narratives as the basis for the creation of dialogic conversations wherein they interactively

reconstructed their shared experiences and assembled the stories into one data set, one narrative (Sevier & McClam, 2010).

Regarding the analysis and findings that emerge from these data, Taylor (2003) argues that autoethnography is a form of research wherein, "the researcher does not expect to be offering an end result, in the form of confirmed or unconfirmed hypotheses, or an objective truth" (p. 5). Instead, the goal is to offer multiple forms of subjective perceptions to the reader by connecting the autobiographical experience of the author(s) to larger social and cultural contexts (Ellis, 2004; Poulos, 2009). The autoethnographic researcher expects and encourages readers of the text to find places of resonance in the narrative that will cause them to critically reflect on their own experiences (Geelan & Taylor, 2001; Poulos, 2009). Hence, as the authors analyze their dialogue/data they consciously break down the wall by asking questions of each other and the reader in order to motivate personal reflections on teacher education experiences and the implications of online education. In doing so, the authors consider the ironies, conflicts, and complications inherent in teaching methods online and center the discussion on three questions:

1. What happens to the community, civil, and civic aspects of a methods course within an online format?
2. What challenges do online methods courses present for modeling promising instructional practices during the preparation of new teachers?
3. What status does the teaching of methods online confer for particular content areas in teacher education?

This approach aligns with the overarching goal of this paper, to connect the specific contexts of online social studies methods with larger questions and concerns. The particular questions arise within conversations about social studies methods, but the authors link each of them to analogous inquiries around the efficacy, purpose, and future of teacher education (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Before moving on to these dialogues, the following is a discussion of the literature that informs this conversation.

Background and Conceptual Framework

Across the online and teacher education literature, themes recur around the issues of classroom community, the challenges of the methods course, and the future of university-based teacher education. Within each theme, questions arise that are relevant to this exploration of online social studies methods courses.

The Importance of Community

A primary theme in the online learning literature deals with speaking, listening, reading, and writing, the forms of communication associated with the human interactions/relationships at the heart of teaching. In traditional F2F instruction speaking and listening are the primary modes of interaction, and they provide the dominant means by which faculty establish and maintain a classroom community. The dominance of writing and reading in online instruction, however, has consequences for classroom relations. These latter communication modes not require more student time (Humphries, 2010), they also require that instructors find ways to create and maintain the same kinds of interpersonal feedback and support that typify student-faculty interactions in a traditional classroom (Humphries, 2010; Johnson, 2005; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). In short, replicating and/or creating a real sense of classroom community requires intentional, structured, and copious amounts of written forms of communication by students and faculty alike (Ke, 2010; Ko & Rossen, 2010).

In addition to these fundamentals of human interactions, there are also structural issues that relate to the kind of community sought and desired in a learning environment. No doubt, the learning management systems (e.g., [Blackboard](#), [Moodle](#), [Learnwise](#)) that universities have adopted allow for content delivery, interactions between students and instructors, student engagement with material, and assessment of student learning (Dale & Lane, 2007; Johnson, 2005; Ko & Rossen, 2010). There are also a wide range of technologies and tools available to instructors as they develop online courses (Carlson et al., 2012).

These resources require that instructors understand the practical realities and functions of the technologies as well as their implications for classroom interactions. Online courses give students the chance to respond to course materials, fellow students, and instructors in ways that embody unique possibilities and demands (Means et al., 2009; Rabe-Hemp, Wollen, & Humiston, 2009). Most notably, it is the anonymity of communication or discourse in online courses that necessarily changes the community dynamic (McCrory, Putnam, & Jansen, 2008). While some scholars have suggested that students participate more during online courses than in F2F settings (Humphries, 2010; Offir, Bezalel, & Barth, 2007), there is a growing body of research in education and elsewhere that details the opportunities for the maltreatment of others when the inherent accountability of F2F interactions is removed (Ko & Rossen, 2010).

(Social Studies) Methods and the Online Challenge

One of the biggest challenges facing all methods instructors is how to teach content in ways that model effective teaching strategies and best practices for students. But researchers have indicated that engaging, constructivist approaches to learning are most problematic when working with students who are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the material (Arbaugh & Benbunan, 2006). Teacher candidates, in other words, struggle most dramatically with methods when their content background is weak and their experience with constructivist models is limited. This is especially problematic for social studies methods, as the average teacher education candidate's background in the topic is most likely typified by worksheets, memorization, and chapter tests, which are not considered to be the highest quality instructional practices (Tanner, 2008). Moreover, scholars have demonstrated that social studies instruction has taken a decided backseat to mathematics, reading, and science (Burnstein, 2009; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Rock et al., 2006; Tanner, 2008). Since [No Child Left Behind](#) this trend has only accelerated (see, for example, Knighton et al., 2003; NCSS, 2007; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010).

Like all methods courses, then, social studies methods courses must constantly negotiate a delicate balance between building candidates' content knowledge while simultaneously developing their capacity to understand promising instructional and assessment practices relevant to the content area. The diminished presence or complete absence of social studies instruction in elementary placement classrooms, however, exacerbates these instructional burdens by presenting a huge disconnect between what candidates learn in methods courses and what they are unable to observe in the field (Burnstein, 2009; McCall, Janssen, & Riederer, 2008). An online social studies methods class necessarily ups the complexity levels of the teaching and learning associated with this course and its content.

Together, the unique aspects of social studies methods and the commonalities they share with other methods courses make this content area a particularly useful vantage point for considering the layers of complexities that online courses present in the education of new teachers.

Teacher Education in Challenging Times

Finally, and importantly for the purposes of this paper, the issues raised by online courses in general and the specific dilemmas that surround online social studies methods courses connect with the ongoing and increasingly heated debates around the future of teacher education. The human factor and community questions, the content concerns, and the challenges raised by online courses connect with the legitimacy struggles currently occupying proponents of traditionally delivered teacher education (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1994; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Hansen, 2008; Robertson, 2008; Sockett, 2008). In the same way that social studies practitioners struggle to affirm the legitimacy of their work, so do teacher educators and schools of education as they battle to maintain the viability of their existence against claims of obsolescence and insignificance (Rhee & Oakley, 2008). Indeed, as opponents of traditional programs intensify their critiques and expand their proposals for alternative pathways for teacher certification (e.g., [Teach for America](#), [The New Teacher Project](#)), the questions surrounding online instruction become more and more relevant.

Questions regarding where online courses figure into either support for or dismantling of university-based teacher education programs frame this paper. At this point in our educational history, this generation of tech-savvy prospective teachers and the culturally contested terrain of teacher education have significance for discussions around the future training of educators. Teacher educators do not

know how or whether online courses will result in bolstering or diminishing the relevancy of university-based teacher education programs; this is the historical moment where our dialogues begin. The authors wanted to seize this moment to use their conversations to question the potential for either or both outcomes and try to make sense of a very fluid and dynamic time in teacher training.

Stopping to Talk about Online Instruction

The conversations recorded and represented throughout this paper were a natural extension of the talks BRS and CMT had engaged in for years. For a time, the authors worked at the same institution and taught similar courses in elementary social studies methods. Working together, they routinely met to discuss issues of teaching, learning, course structure, the status of social studies, and the current state of teacher education. These conversations continued even after BRS and CMT ended up in different schools of education. The process of creating and teaching the online courses at their respective schools added extra layers to these conversations, pushing them to think deeper about the topics already of concern. The beginning of this conversation is, in a real and true sense, more like stepping into the middle of one of the many examinations of their work. The discussion begins, then, with a topic that BRS and CMT frequently revisited: their interactions with the students in their classrooms.

Remembering Randy and John

BRS: You know, I was thinking about all the community and civic issues involved in the methods course and I just kept thinking about Randy—that student I had a couple years ago in the traditional face-to-face class....

CMT: I remember him—why did his memory come up?

BRS: Well, he was from that really small town and openly talked about himself as a "redneck." He was adamant about not having to learn about diversity or caring about it because he was going to teach back in his hometown....

CMT: That's right! And didn't he and the other students just really go at it all semester?

BRS: Yes! Exactly! He brought his beliefs to every class! And he was pretty much a minority of one....At first the other students just kind of let me talk...you know, without challenging him...but soon, they just started questioning him—and vice versa—about pretty much every opinion he had ...

CMT: And how did he respond?

BRS: Well, at first, he just kind of looked at his fellow students as these "crazy liberals." I mean we talked about gay and lesbian issues, institutionalized racism, and, of course, what patriotism looks like. Anyway, we just got in all these wonderful—and sometimes really tense—conversations, but everyone participated....It was just phenomenal....And Randy gave as good as he got in those conversations!

CMT: You know this makes me think about that student I had in the online course—John—remember the guy that really brought some borderline white supremacist views to that class....

BRS: Yes....Randy wasn't that extreme, but he saw no need to talk about issues of race, class, sexual orientation....bringing these issues up was just not appropriate and they had nothing to do with teaching!

CMT: Exactly! John felt the same way....Anyway, what you were saying about the conversations and discussions in class was the opposite of my experience....

BRS: How so?

CMT: Well, after our initial face-to-face meeting, pretty much the rest of the class was online....And we did all these threaded and reflective discussions around some of the same issues you described....But in the online setting the students really just shut down on John....

BRS: What do you mean?

CMT: I mean, the written responses from John came out really hostile....and the other students reacted to his comments on race ("not socially constructed!") and sexual orientation ("should not even be part of a teacher education program") really strongly at first, but John always responded in ways that refused to even consider their views. By the last month, they just stopped responding to him at all....

BRS: Yes! This is exactly why I started thinking about Randy. I mean, here we are teaching social studies as primarily a civic-focused topic, right? And my students just exemplified community in every sense. Randy and his fellow students brought real diversity of thought and experience into that class every time we met....But this is key....they did not just let that diversity exist unchallenged....they pushed each other...sometimes uncomfortably...to really think about different points of view....

CMT: And that is what did not happen in the online course! John just got ostracized—ignored by the others. And I wonder....would this have been different in a traditional setting? Would his presence and the presence of his fellow students have changed the dynamic? Perhaps physical proximity is a key to community sometimes....Maybe the fact that neither John nor his fellow students actually had the chance to really see the others and interact in real time and space had consequences for our community

BRS: Exactly what I am wondering....What do we lose when we are not all together in time and place?

CMT: Right, your students got to react and to see each other react! Mine could respond whenever...and they did not get the chance to actually see the person in front of them....So John never got the chance to see how his words affected them....And the other students never got a real feel for his demeanor as he said these things! So the interactions just stopped—with nothing but hostility between John and the others....

BRS: And that is key! There was definite hostility in my class....Randy was hostile toward the other students and vice versa....But as they got to know each other over the semester...they began to laugh and joke as they were pushing each other to think....as the connections became stronger, everyone in class benefited!

CMT: But we never got to that point in the online class, the students never connected with John. I never connected with John. John never connected with the class.

Community, Communication, and Civics

When community exists, learning is strengthened—everyone is smarter, more ambitious, and productive.

Peterson (1992)

This dialogue represents two very different scenarios from a F2F and an online social studies methods course. Taken together, they demonstrate the importance of community and communication in these classes. Undoubtedly, both the content and instructional delivery in social studies often attends to controversial and/or contested issues (e.g., Au, Bigelow, & Karp, 2007; Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, & Miller, 2001; Parker, 2002). The historical and contemporary events at the heart of the course ask teacher education candidates to consider the impact of raced, classed, and gendered experiences in this country. Classroom community, then, is key; a challenging, yet safe, environment is an essential component for allowing teacher candidates to engage together in the analyses of diverse perspectives and issues (Beck & Kosnick, 2001; Howey, 1996).

Community requisites, however, are by no means the exclusive province of social studies instruction. Across their preparation programs, teacher candidates have myriad opportunities to examine educational topics that will compel them to examine who they are as individuals and professionals as well as to entertain multiple viewpoints on a whole raft of issues. The use of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender literature in elementary schools (Sapp, 2010), the teaching of culturally relevant mathematics (Moses & Cobb, 2002), or the exploration of gender preconceptions in science instruction (Minogue, 2010) are just a few examples of the challenging conversations that can occur across the disciplines in teacher education. Regardless of intellectual domain, teacher educators believe in and seek transformation in the classroom experience. We strive for those empathic opportunities that allow students to begin to perceive the world as others might, an outcome greatly facilitated by community.

Not surprisingly, then, the importance of community is increasingly a generally accepted principle of effective teacher education (Beck & Kosnik, 2001; Rovai & Jordan, 2004). If nothing else, this first section of the dialogue attests to the consequences that can occur when community is absent or fails to materialize (Hollins & Torres-Guzman, 2005). While developing a true sense of community in a F2F

course is neither an easy nor given outcome, it is decidedly, even exponentially, trickier to achieve in an online setting. In fundamental ways, classroom communication changes in the online format. The written word takes primacy over the spoken in student-to-teacher and student-to-student discussions. And, importantly, the physical presence of the constituents is absent from all of these written interactions. These realities easily undercut the things that teachers adept at creating community use to create the trusting relationships necessary for helping students wrestle together with difficult and chronic educational challenges (Beck & Kosnik, 2001). The dominance of the written word, coupled with the lack of physical proximity, can flatten out the emotional impact of vocal, facial, and bodily expressions. This flattening can potentially diminish the empathic responses that can develop when students see, hear, and even feel their fellow students' beliefs and experiences within a physical classroom.

This dialogue raised a significant question around the online implications for the work of teacher educators: Does the online environment pose a threat to the transformative power of teacher education to enable candidates to empathize with and understand diverse perspectives? Of course, it is likely that the experiences of Randy and John were the result of myriad variables (e.g., the instructors' teaching styles, the strengths of the students' personally held beliefs, the activities completed). John's experiences, in other words, may or may not have been different in a F2F environment, and vice versa for Randy. Still, online instruction does offer students with more opportunities to opt out of the immediacy of uncomfortable classroom moments. And these moments are the ones with the most transformative potential for all students—the Randys, the Johns, and their fellow classmates.

Seeing is Believing

CMT: Talking about what our students bring to the classroom reminds me of what our candidates increasingly are not bringing to class....

BRS: Yes!! I have taken to starting the semester by having my students write down the first thing that comes to mind when I say elementary social studies...and invariably they respond with blank faces.

CMT: I do that, too! They usually end up writing down things like "what social studies," "boring," or "memorizing dates"....I always have a few outliers—students who had teachers that did amazing activities or projects, and these are the things they remember most....It's always specific activities or fieldtrips that stand out for them...things that made them really engage in social studies.

BRS: Mine too...but you know, these positive responses have gotten fewer and farther between as the testing movement has advanced in recent years....And this is less of a content issue and more of a pedagogical one...one that has serious consequences for online courses.

CMT: How so?

BRS: Well, it was Lortie who termed the phrase "the apprenticeship of observation" right?

CMT: Yes, the idea pre-service teachers have been in the classroom for over 12 years and have seen enough teaching to feel like they know how to do it.

BRS: And without any intervention, most people will default to teaching as they were taught....So our students come in not having seen much (if any) social studies and there are entire school districts out there telling their teachers not to spend too much time on non-tested subjects (like social studies) so many of our students see absolutely no social studies instruction....Do you see where I'm going?

CMT: I do—the teacher education classroom becomes really the only place where students catch up on the elementary (in every sense of the word) content knowledge they missed out on and where they actually get to experience social studies teaching!

BRS: The only place they truly see and participate in hands-on and minds-on methods.

CMT: I cannot count how many times I have been told by students that they have never experienced social studies instruction done the way I do it in the methods course....This is not really a boast—as virtually anything I could do in the room would be new to them....

BRS: Right....But it suggests the great burden of apprenticeship we hold...we have become the only means of apprenticeship, observation, and participation....

CMT: And this all raises questions for the online course....

Methods and Modeling

It is highly likely that candidates who were educated in high-stakes learning environments bring with them to their teacher education programs the experience of being taught by teachers who engaged in...practices that equate learning with a test score.

Brown (2010)

This juncture of the dialogue reveals longstanding problems confronting social studies educators: Our students typically bring little content knowledge or experience to their teacher education program. Social studies has always had a kind of second-class status in the elementary curriculum. Yet, this generation of teacher education candidates represents the first wave of students who will perhaps see no social studies instruction, let alone effective forms of it, either during their own elementary years or in their field placement settings (Knighton, 2003). The problems facing social studies are already reverberating across all methods courses in teacher education. Would-be teachers are coming to preparation programs steeped in the testing protocols that dominate public school classrooms (Selwyn, 2007). With respect to social studies, they are not lacking the "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 2002), but their educational histories are becoming increasingly dominated by prepackaged and canned curricula (Brown, 2010). They will likely see numerous iterations of trans-contextual and teacher-proof instructional practices in their literacy, mathematics, and science field placements.

Education courses across the methods spectrum, then, are quickly becoming the only place where emerging teachers can have any sustained interaction with instructional practices that do not reduce teaching to its relationship to Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and outcome benchmarks. Yet, in both historic and contemporary contexts, scholars continue to document the struggles that teacher educators have with regard to the modeling of engaging, hands-on, and student-relevant practices in the traditional F2F teacher education classroom (Cuban, 1993; Loughran & Berry, 2005; Lunenberg, Korthagen, & Swennen, 2007; Niemi, 2002). If education is not just about raising test scores, then the burden of providing candidates with opportunities to see practices that embody alternative educational priorities and goals falls exponentially on the shoulders of teacher educators.

However, the realities and burdens for teacher educators within an online setting must be considered. What impact does the online format have on teacher educators' ongoing struggle to convince candidates of the value and need for hands-on and relevant K-12 practices? The proliferation of online methods courses, after all, could potentially reify teacher education's inability to offer convincing alternatives to the apprenticeship of observation in today's educational environment (Ball, 2003). At the very least, teacher educators could be presumed to wonder what value-add an online course provides, over a F2F course, for helping candidates conceptualize practices unbound to the narrow definitions of educational success that dominate the current discourse.

Online Analogies

CMT: So as we are sitting here talking about the irrelevancy or even the obsolescence of our content area in public schools, I'm wondering what message the online social studies methods course itself sends?

BRS: What do you mean?

CMT: Well, when I was first asked to teach social studies methods as a doctoral student, my first reaction was to feel flattered. And I was excited because I loved teaching social studies when I was an elementary teacher....But I also wondered why they chose me....I mean the dean never asked me if I had any background or experience with social studies....They knew I had been an elementary teacher but that was it....I had zero experience working with professional development or teacher work in social studies!

BRS: Same here....I was assigned to teach social studies methods in an e-mail I received from the dean in the summer before my third year of my doctoral program....Like you, I loved social studies but till then I had no experience teaching its methods!

CMT: And this is a different kind of process than for other methods, right?

BRS: Right....I mean there was no way we would have ever been asked to teach literacy or reading methods without a thorough background check....

CMT: Absolutely, and you know what else? I remember that the doctoral students and adjunct faculty teaching in the other methods had a very different experience with their methods instruction! Those instructors actually interacted with other people teaching the course!

BRS: Yes! At my school of education, too! I know because when I taught math methods, we doctoral students met weekly with actual math education professors to talk about our teaching, our students, our struggles, and our successes! But I was on my own for social studies....

CMT: There is definitely a hierarchy with the school—a pecking order that determines the importance of different courses and content areas...eerily reflective of the insignificance that our students associate with social studies in public schools....

BRS: Yes, and when it came time to decide which methods course would be offered online first....

CMT: Social Studies...no questions asked.

BRS: No questions asked is right! And couldn't this also prove analogous to schools of education?

CMT: How so?

BRS: Well, it seems not a faculty meeting goes by where we don't talk about the growing disregard for teacher education—not that it has ever really enjoyed high regard—in the larger university and beyond!

CMT: That is so true...so it's almost as if the social studies methods course within the school of education is a micro version of the school of education within the university, right?

BRS: And, if the online methods course within our schools was first attempted with a course of, let's say, decidedly lesser consequence....

CMT: Then the growing calls for online coursework could be applied, perhaps, to those departments with the least status in the university....

BRS: It's a thought....

Teacher Education, Technology and Tomorrow

A large share of policy makers hold the view that almost anyone can teach reasonably well—that entering teaching requires, at most, knowing something about a subject, and the rest of the fairly simple "tricks of the trade" can be picked up on the job.

Darling-Hammond (2006)

This final section of the online conversation illuminates the position that social studies courses occupy too frequently in teacher education. The authors did not become involved in the teaching of social studies methods because of their extensive experience or excellent records of teaching success in the field. Rather, BRS and CMT's initiations into this particular methods arena seem most likely grounded in the "warm-body" theory of pedagogical decision-making (Zeichner, 2005). Buttressing this view, neither author received anything in the way of instructional or collegial support as they undertook the teaching of these courses for the first time. These realities concomitantly attest to the subject area hierarchy that exists even in teacher education and reify the low status of social studies. In immediately identifiable ways, then, this lack of concern for ensuring competent, let alone excellent, social studies instruction mirrors the increasingly institutionalized disregard for this content in public schools. Its lack of connection to standardized tests, AYP, and virtually any accountability measure in use directly connotes its insignificance.

There is, however, a more unsettling parallel here. The authors' experiences with the status of social studies (in K-12 and higher education) bring to mind the "anyone can do this" mindset that Darling-Hammond (2006), signifies as one of the dominant discourses around the teaching profession. This discourse, while far from new, is currently playing a significant role in critiques of university teacher training. Embedding their arguments in the same accountability rationale used in current redefinitions of teacher effectiveness, the opponents of traditional licensure programs depict teacher education as

wholly unrelated to the ultimate goal of teaching as they see it: the raising of students' achievement scores (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Weiner, 2007; Zeichner, 2006). This narrow conception of education ignores numerous expectations associated with teaching, including the enculturation process, the preparation of responsible citizens, the development of students' critical thinking skills, etc. (Weiner, 2007). It also strengthens the notion that, with limited training, virtually anyone can teach.

These constrictive visions of teaching are achieving dominance in public and political spheres. The lack of F2F interactions and the constraints that online educators face in simulating actual classroom environments can establish the online methods course as a means to prioritize content over the human and communal aspects of education, precisely the arguments that are the foundation of programs such as [Teach for America](#), [The New Teacher Project](#), and others. Online courses have developed in these contexts and their ultimate impact is still to be determined. Still, given the community and modeling concerns illuminated here, shouldn't teacher educators question how online methods courses might contribute to the prevailing reductionist views of teaching and teacher education? Shouldn't the growth of online methods in teacher education, at the very least, make teacher educators wonder if they could be advancing their own obsolescence? If not careful about approaches to online instruction might teacher educators not tacitly endorse the notion that not only that anyone can teach, but also that anyone can teach teachers?

Conclusion: Questions to Consider moving Forward with Online Teacher Education

Working in schools of education where online instruction is either the norm or a new initiative, the authors accept the reality that online instruction is a permanent fixture in higher education. Finishing their first couple years of involvement in these courses seemed an appropriate time to pause and reflect on what the realities of online instruction portend for both social studies methods and teacher education. Though not the focus of this paper, the authors recognize there are many positive motives and outcomes for online education. Just in relation to the institutional benefits, online courses are cost-effective and can potentially bring access to college courses to non-traditional students (Ke, 2010; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leindhardt, 2006; Moller et al., 2008; Wise & Rothman, 2010; Young & Lewis, 2008). In addition, these courses embody some promising teaching and learning opportunities. For example, some teacher education candidates may find that online courses facilitate their involvement in text-based discussions, involve them more deeply with the content, and/or allow them to develop a greater sense of efficacy around the use of technology with their future students (Brown, 1997; Dale & Lane, 2007; Humphries, 2010; Minock, 2006; Rabe-Hemp, Wollen, & Humiston, 2009; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008).

In the authors' experiences with teaching social studies methods online, they did, in fact, witness some of these developments and outcomes; many of BRS's and CMT's students expressed that their experiences with text-based discussions and online projects were positive and that the course itself precipitated positive changes in their attitudes toward social studies. If nothing else, these student assessments reflect online literature that details the promising applications of technology in teacher education (e.g., Desai, Hart, & Richards, 2009; Frey, 2008; Heafner & Petty, 2010; McCrory, Putnam, & Jansen, 2008; Paulus & Scherff, 2008).

Notwithstanding the positive aspects of online learning, the authors' conversations reflect what they simultaneously found lacking and alarming in the prospects of online methods. Thus, this discussion focuses on the questions and concerns that arose as the authors traversed the landscape between F2F and online delivery, centering the dialogues on those experiences that truly made BRS and CMT think first about the implications of online courses for teaching.

Looking at these dialogues, the authors quickly realized that these online concerns had connections beyond social studies. Indeed, each of the three main aspects of the conversations has relevance and implications for teacher education and schools of education as the field moves forward with online instruction. The lack of immediate, F2F interaction that caused the authors to wonder about the creation of community in online social studies is surely disconcerting for all methods instructors who struggle to create the necessary classroom environments for examining the controversial aspects of their content area. The struggles to convince students of the need for social studies instruction and the authors' wonderings about how online instruction might contribute to these struggles are also relevant for teacher educators. In an educational climate wherein teacher education candidates can, and do, experience field

placement settings in which every teacher in the district is literally on the same page at the same time in their literacy or math instruction, every methods instructor has to be concerned. Countering the one-size-fits-all, test-score-raising priorities in K-12 schools will continue to occupy much of our time and energy. And, if online courses proliferate, all teacher educators might someday have to ask themselves if virtual interactions can truly allow new teachers to experience the rich and student-centered promising practices in math, science, literacy, etc. Finally, the social studies status questions explored in the closing dialogue represent a cautionary tale for teacher education. The authors see a corollary between the "anyone can teach social studies" mentality that often dominates teacher education and the "anyone can teach" discourse that pervades debates around teacher education that has possible implications for online instruction.

Defending teacher education as necessary for the development of educators concerned with more than content delivery and proficiency goals for students will require arguments in favor of online instruction that are about more than technology advancements or budgetary benefits. Teacher educators will have to show that the community, content, and pedagogical values we hold can be maintained (or advanced) in online courses.

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