



Trends and Promising Practices in Early Childhood Teacher Education Online: The View from New Zealand

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Abstract: Based on years of experience teaching online, leading eTeaching faculty development institutes, and developing an online learning management system for early childhood teacher education, the authors share lessons learned about effective practices for teaching and learning online. Their work is done in the context of early childhood teacher education and they have created eTeaching and eLearning solutions that are specific and responsive to who the learners are, how they learn, and the requirements of the early childhood content. Fox and Donohue identify and describe six trends and eight effective practices, and make the case that it is the focus on early childhood learners and content connected with established adult learning principles, proven distance learning methods, informed instructional design, and enabling technologies that lead to innovative and effective online teaching and learning.

Since 2001, we have had the opportunity to host a number of eTeaching Institutes for early childhood faculty and educators in places like New Zealand, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Canada, and across the United States. This has given us a chance to articulate our vision for early childhood teacher education online, and to define effective practices for eTeaching and eLearning. In this inaugural issue of *He Kupu*, we share our perspectives on current trends and promising practices to help establish the baseline for ongoing discussions about the role of technology in early childhood teacher education.

Perhaps the most significant 'lesson learned' has been the importance of putting our work in the context of online teacher education programs for early childhood care and education practitioners. Our students tend to be non-traditional adult learners, working full time in early care and education programs. They tend to have a strong preference for face-to-face instruction coupled with lower levels of technology skills and experience. Understanding our content, knowing who our learners are, their needs, and how they learn have been critical components in the development of effective online learning experiences. Working within this context has reinforced our stance that the future of professional development for early childhood teacher educators and training must incorporate effective practices in teaching and learning online.

Understanding the contexts has also helped us identify the critical connections that are essential building blocks for effective online teaching and learning. The best models we have seen lead with the focus on early childhood learners and early childhood content, and connect this with established adult learning



principles, proven distance learning methods, informed instructional design, and enabling technologies.

Six Trends to Watch

As trend watchers, we have identified six trends that currently have implications for the future of early childhood teacher education online.

1. **Moving online** – Around the world there has been a dramatic increase in the number of early childhood courses, certificates, credentials, degrees and professional development programs available online. When we once debated the question of what the role of technology was, the question has now shifted to how we should use technology as a tool to increase access and improve the quality of teacher education and training. However, the proliferation of online early childhood teacher education programs has also raised serious questions about the quality and efficacy of such programs. There are also a number of common inherent barriers. These include technology access, basic technology skills, literacy, institutional infrastructure, and faculty training and support. The higher education trend toward moving online will continue, but work remains to be done on standards and effective practices to ensure online teacher education leads to increased knowledge, enhanced teacher performance and improved outcomes for young children.
2. **Making new friends** – Collaboration and the creation of community are keys to success in teaching and learning online. The most successful programs and delivery systems combine the strengths of individuals and organisations to design, develop and deliver high quality online programs. The online learning community offers eLearners new opportunities to share ideas, exchange information and resources, and experience the roles of teacher and learner. Just as the Internet breaks down barriers of time and distance, emerging online programs offer opportunities for new partnerships and virtual communities of practice that will improve online teacher education within programs and across our field.
3. **Defining and developing pathways** – As early childhood educators move online in search of professional development, colleges and higher education institutions are confronted with the need to better define and develop pathways into courses and degree programs that specifically provide for non-traditional learners who work full time. Many of our students are new to online learning and begin with limited technology skills and experience. Student support and opportunities for orientation and introduction to the online mode of learning are critical to successful online learning. We meet these needs in a variety of ways including: pre-course self assessments; basic technology training; 'how to learn online' courses and materials; online 'open houses' and guided tours to give students the opportunity to explore and discover the online learning environment prior to the beginning of the course; making sure that help is never more than a click or a phone call away; and designing help resources specifically for these learners.

In the United States the rapid growth of online learning programs has put pressure on existing articulation agreements between two and four year



institutions to create seamless pathways between institutions. More fully online and blended learning approaches to early childhood teacher education will emerge in the next few years as the demand for training increases, and as students make choices of programs and institutions by surfing the Internet instead of visiting traditional campuses.

4. **Recognising prior learning** – This is not a new trend, but internationally the market-driven reality is that institutions of higher education that offer a robust process of recognition of life experience and prior learning for degree credit have a distinct advantage in the online higher education market over those that do not.
5. **Accepting online learning as equivalent to face-to-face instruction** – Despite more than 30 years of “no significant difference” research (Russell, 2001; Twigg, 2001) demonstrating that distance learning and traditional classroom based instruction lead to similar outcomes for learners, the field of early childhood education has been cautious and even skeptical about the efficacy of online learning for teacher education, training, and professional development. However as more higher education institutions put early childhood courses and degree programs online, the debate has now shifted from “if” we should teach online to “how” best to teach online.
6. **Linking standards to outcomes** – In early care and education we start all conversations from the perspective of what is best for the child. Improving child outcomes is at the core of all teacher education programs, and for this to become reality effective educational experiences that increase knowledge and improve practice are paramount. In many parts of the world, work is being carried out on defining a set of early learning standards that link knowledge, teacher performance, and best practice to child outcomes. In the discussions that centre on online learning, we must now add distance learning standards as well as effective practices in teaching and learning online to this equation: Distance learning standards + Early learning standards = Improved teacher performance leading to improved child outcomes (Joint Information Systems Committee, 2004; Moore, 2005; Tertiary eLearning Reference Group, 2006).

Eight Effective Practices

From our own online teaching experiences, through working with international early childhood faculty and trainers, and throughout the development of the *ecelearn* platform, we have followed eight principles that define effective practices for early childhood teacher education online.

1. **Be intentional** – Intentionality is a higher order teaching skill, and we need to hold ourselves to that same high standard as we design and deliver online courses for early childhood teachers. We need to know what we are doing and why, and we need to base our decisions on what we know about our learners and about the early childhood content. We then need to put our work in context and understand the possibilities and limitations of the technology tools and methods we select. Finally, we have learned that there is real value in the acquisition of new and enhanced technology skills for our



eLearners that come as a byproduct of the online experience – an intended consequence!

2. **Understand the learners** – By understanding the learners, how they learn, and their preference for interactions and community, we can design online learning environments and experiences that meet their needs, interests, abilities and learning styles in empowering ways. By understanding the specific skill sets needed to be a successful eLearner – literacy, technology literacy, independent learning, collaborative learning, and reflective practice – we can design experiences that support and nurture the development of these learning skills.

3. **Remove the barriers** – Significant barriers to effective online learning include access, affordability, equity, technology skills and literacy. Wherever online teacher education programs are being developed we have found, for early childhood students, these barriers to participation and success are real and need to be addressed.

In designing the *ecelearn* online learning environment we have been intentional in creating a user interface that is friendly, inviting, accessible, simple to use, easy to navigate, hard to get lost in, and with help functions that are designed specifically for new online learners. These design decisions flow directly from our knowledge of who the learners are, how they learn, and what the early childhood content includes. We have also been intentional in what not to include. Many of our online learners only have access to older technology and slow dial-up connections so we have reviewed the review of technology tools such as multi-media, streaming video, and other graphics has been extensive, to ensure they do not make the content difficult or impossible to access. Our students deserve quality, relevant and accessible online learning experiences. While we strive to create new ways to access learning online the adoption of new technology tools without careful consideration of the student users may create new barriers and may not necessarily support positive learning experiences.

4. **Prepare learners for success** – Learning to learn online has to begin before the first course starts, otherwise the steep learning curve of managing the technology and online learning environment as well as the course content, can be overwhelming and discouraging for new eLearners. Strategies we have used and have observed in other successful online teacher education programs include: pre-course information; reflective assessments; technology skill building specific to learning online; 'How to learn online' courses, resources and tutorials in context; and 'just in time' strategies to develop the skills progressively as they are needed.

5. **Make it easy to get help** – A guiding principle in the design of *ecelearn* has been that help should never be more than a click away. It is our job as the instructional designers to anticipate common problems and offer students the solutions they need just in time. We have also learned that what we provide must be absolutely user-friendly; that is, it has to be provided in the context of learners who display levels of technology skills and experience. For adult learners (and their instructors), we have to make it safe to say, "I don't know how to..." We have achieved great success in encouraging learners to help each other and in developing a knowledge base of FAQs that are learner and context specific. The bottom line is that we are new to



this style of teaching and learning, we have much to learn, and we will all need help sooner or later.

6. **Keep it simple** – This is a core principle in the design and development of *ecelearn*. We have intentionally created an online learning environment that is welcoming, inviting, easy to navigate, user-friendly, uncluttered and simple to use. We offer easy access through multiple entry points and an easy login procedure. We provide simple, consistent and ‘always there’ navigation; straightforward, intuitive tools and functions; and easy to use tools for communication, information exchange and community building. Our goal is to make the technology transparent and to remove all ‘bells and whistles’ and ‘visual ‘noise’ unless they specifically support the content and learning processes. These design principles have evolved from our approach to understanding the learner and the content as the starting point for the development. Just because ‘IT’ enables it, does not mean that we should include it. There must always be an identifiable reason associated with our student learners, the intended learning outcomes, content and the new knowledge our teaching objective is to enable.
7. **Create community** – We know that our early childhood learners have a strong preference for face-to-face learning experiences and a strong desire to be part of a community of learners, and we recognise the value of cooperative and collaborative learning experiences at all levels of teacher education. We have made community-building a top priority in the design of *ecelearn* and the instructional design of the courses is designed to encourage connections from the learner to the instructor, to other learners, to the content and to the application of the content in teaching practice. The online learning environment also allows us to expand the community of learners and bring in outside experts and ideas and perspectives in new ways. The world of early care and education is literally at the learner’s fingertips. Our role therefore is to connect our learners to ideas, information and resources that build a global community of practice for early childhood professionals (Wenger, 1999; American Psychological Association, 1997).
8. **Be a learner** – Our final effective practice relates to our amazing learning experiences of the past six years as we have worked with early childhood students online, trained eTeachers, and developed the *ecelearn* platform to support New Zealand Tertiary College online. Our advice is to be a true and honest learner and to be open to a new world of ideas and perspectives. This is a new way of teaching and learning for early childhood professionals, but by encouraging curiosity, questioning, through trial and error, and the occasional ‘teachable moment’ we can advance the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning online in ways that lead to better teachers and improved outcomes for the children, parents and families in our care.

Where to from here...

We are excited about the growth of online learning opportunities and we are encouraged by the focus on standards and effective practices to assure that online early childhood teacher education programs are held to a high standard of quality and performance. We look forward to the opportunity to continue these



discussions in *He Kupu* and in the eCommunity at www.ecelearn.com. By sharing ideas and promising practices we can create a community of practice dedicated to excellence in early childhood teacher education online.

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