

Using Technology in Teaching Historical Understanding: An Evaluation of a Professional Development Program

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Abstract: This paper describes and discusses the results of an evaluation study conducted on a federally-funded Teacher Quality grant that provided opportunities for professional growth and development to selected middle and high school teachers. Using various tools (surveys, interviews, observations, electronic discussion postings, etc.), data collected and analyzed included content knowledge, reports on usefulness of training activities, teacher observations. Findings included challenges (e.g., attrition, school based support, and job changes) and lessons learned (e.g., experiences ranging from planning and curriculum development to project implementation and budget management). The paper concludes that the program has achieved a level of success. However, this is just the beginning of much needed professional development opportunities to support middle and high school social studies teachers.

Introduction

Instructional technologies provide new opportunities for supporting student learning in various educational settings. Continuous upgrade and improvement of these technologies have led to more experimentation on how they can support teaching and learning activities (Brett & Nagra, 2005). Experimentation with new tools in the classroom, traditional or virtual, and with various student populations have led to different outcomes, positive or negative.

This southern state K-12 performance standards emphasize that social studies teachers (a) bridge essential understanding of the past to contemporary events, (b) assist students in understanding the nature of historical inquiry and the role of primary and secondary sources, (c) encourage the consideration of multiple perspectives on events, (d) engage students in speculation about the known and unknown motives and actions of historic figures, and (e) integrate the strands of social studies. The development of technology-supported classroom instruction can help social studies teachers achieve these standards (Zhao, 2003), but research shows that students seldom have access to curriculum and instruction that engages readily available technologies (Keller & Langhorst, 2008). While scholars have demonstrated the effectiveness of linking technology to specific content areas and pedagogy (Hammond & Manfra, 2009), implementing this research in the social studies classroom has been slow because a majority of teachers remain uncomfortable with the basic habits of using technology (DeWitt, 2007).

Most students have been subjected to traditional methods in teaching Social Studies such as lecture and textbooks that have ingrained in them a sense of how this subject should be taught (Ross, 2000). Technology can help teachers transition away from those traditional methods and toward a pedagogy that stresses historical inquiry and student discovery. Technology is an educational tool that can be used by educators to provide a level of interactivity with the curriculum. As an instructional tool it can promote the nature of historical inquiry and use contemporary technologies to help students draw connections between the past and present (Journell, 2009). Research shows that professional development opportunities and sustained classroom support from higher education faculty encourages educators to introduce new pedagogical methods into the classrooms (Medina, Pollard, Schneider, & Leonhardt, 2000) and improves their confidence and abilities to effectively deliver social studies content (Boon, Burke, Fore, & Spencer, 2006).

Thank you for reviewing one of my publications.

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