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Holy COW: Scaffolding Case-Based “Conferencing on the Web” With Preservice Teachers

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Holy COW: Scaffolding Case-Based Conferencing on the Web With Preservice Teachers

Abstract

This study explored how to use the Web to foster collaboration and interaction among preservice teachers in undergraduate educational psychology. These preservice teachers conversed electronically with peers, mentors, and instructors on the Web about cases related to their early field experiences using an asynchronous conferencing tool called Conferencing on the Web (COW). Whereas earlier research compared levels of scaffolding on student generation and discussion of cases in COW within specific time periods, this particular study allowed longer amounts of time for students to post and discuss cases. In addition, there was more qualitative data collected here than in the previous study. The 157 student participants in this study produced 319 cases during the conference with 620 peer replies and 298 mentor replies. Students submitted the majority of their cases to the secondary-school conference, while less than ten percent of the cases were submitted to the general-case conference. In effect, they failed to perceive the generalizability of their field experiences. Students received on average about three peer or mentor comments on their cases. Transcript analyses from 75 randomly selected cases indicated that students failed to justify most of their comments. In addition, peer feedback was extremely conversational and opinionated. Conversely, instructor mentoring was focused on high level questioning, providing examples, and case specific feedback. While data from student interviews and evaluative surveys on their electronic conferencing experience were mixed, students who experienced this activity as part of an entire Web-based course claimed more benefits.

Holy COW: Scaffolding Case-Based Conferencing on the Web

With Preservice Teachers

The past decade has been an exciting period for building cognitive apprenticeships with electronic learning tools. The power of asynchronous conferencing tools to facilitate college student reflection on field experiences and internships is without precedence (Bonk & King, 1998). Technology tools can now bind students, peers, mentors, instructors, practicing teachers, and experts in an array of resources, discussions, and curriculum recommendations. There are daily advances in tools to foster student generation of ideas, collaboration, and knowledge integration and evaluation. Unfortunately, there is minimal guidance as to their pedagogical significance and scant research to make firm claims as to how teacher educators might use such technology. In fact, there is growing recognition that the field of computer-supported collaboration learning (CSCL) lacks clear theoretical housing (Koschmann, 1994).

It is hard to discount the fact that various technologies are transforming the formats of teaching and learning in most higher education and public school settings (Bonk, Hara, Dennen, Malikowski, & Supplee, 2000; Bonk, Kirkley, Hara, & Dennen 2001). The generation of computing networks to support live and delayed group collaboration has fortuitously paralleled the emergence of models and techniques for promoting cooperative learning and collaborative work in schools (Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway, & Krajcik, 1996). Many questions remain, however, related to whether such tools for collaboration and communication have increased student access to education and resulting learning (Owston, 1997). Do unique student interactions and rich discussion threads increase student learning and comprehension? Does greater access to resources and the ability to browse instructional materials from multiple locations lead to more highly linked and accessible knowledge structures? Equally important, how does communication with students from other locales and countries enhance student perspective taking abilities and ensuing attitudes and beliefs about the rest of the world (Bonk, Appelman, & Hay, 1996; Windschitl, 1998)? As new learning technologies emerge, informed researchers, talented teachers, and innovative instructional designers must find new paths for their creative use.

Electronic Cases in Teacher Education

This particular study combines the recent movement toward apprenticing students in more meaningful and authentic learning environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991) with teacher education research highlighting the importance of case-based reasoning (Lundeberg, Levin, & Harrington, 1999; Kowalski, Weaver, & Henson, 1994, Shulman, 1991; Silverman, Welty, & Lyon, 1992). While aspects of each area are elaborated below, more thorough reviews of each topic can be found in Bonk, Hansen, Grabner, Lazar, and Mirabelli (1998) and Bonk, Malikowski, Angeli, and East (1998).

Case-based learning emphasizes the importance of realistic or authentic learning settings. More authentic problems can serve to anchor instruction in complex events that rely on the application of course concepts and principles for their resolution (Williams, 1992). It is the application of concepts to real world events that make this learning format appealing. Important to this particular study, many teacher education researchers point to the utility of cases for distinguishing expert and novice teacher performance, and, simultaneously, moving preservice teachers down the road to teaching expertise (Barnett, 1991; Livingston & Borko, 1989; Westerman, 1991). Other researchers have begun to discuss and illustrate how technologies might be employed to create reusable cases that preservice teachers can reflect on, discuss, debate, and evaluate (Admiraal, Lockhorst, Wubbels, Korthagen, & Veen, 1997; Bonk, Hansen, et al., 1998; Bonk, Hara, et al., 2000; Bonk, Malikowski, et al., 1998; Copeland, 1989; Merseth, 1991). Some of these technology innovations and pedagogical strategies focus on ways to reduce the relative isolation students teachers often feel by discussing field experiences in the form of electronic problem cases and success stories. Other novel technology applications in teacher education focus on typical teaching and learning environments and problems before students head to the field. In either situation, the goal is the professionalization of teacher education programs and the preparation of more skilled and competent teachers.

Web-based collaboration and learning tools, for instance, can offer an assortment of richly textured cases in accessible, expedient, visually interactive, broad, diverse, and cheap formats. In fact, there are plenty of opportunities available to college instructors wanting to apprentice students in the teaching profession with cases (Riesbeck, 1996). For instance, some Web support sites for teaching education courses contain simulations embedded with realistic student records and images, expert commenting, personalized feedback mechanisms, and other key instructional help and task structuring.

Sociocultural Underpinnings of Electronic Environments

As such electronic learning environments emerge for apprenticing teachers and other professionals, educators have increasingly found sociocultural theory attractive for explaining how student learning and development unfolds in these environments (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). In fact, Bonk and Kim (1998) detail how sociocultural theory can be applied in adult learning settings. For instance, Vygotsky's (1986) arguments about the benefits of learning in a social context certainly have applicability in Web-based conferencing in higher-education environments. When students engage in social interaction and discourse about real world teaching and learning settings, such as electronic case conferencing about field experiences, they are exposed to the strategies and skills of peers and mentors which should help them internalize new competencies (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

One key sociocultural principle, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), relates to finding ways for experts and more capable peers to assist student learning and problem solving beyond their independent reach. In effect, the ZPD represents the area between the student's actual or unassisted performance on a

task and his/her performance when provided with outside support or guidance (Wertsch, 1985). When students debate the cases they create, they are simultaneously constructing new knowledge and debating issues at the edge of their ZPDs. And with asynchronous electronic systems, opportunities for advice and interactive scaffolding within student ZPDs can come from distant experts and peers as well as from students within one's cohort.

While students might debate and negotiate ideas electronically, mentors, experts, and instructors can offer encouragement, modeling, feedback, questioning, and task structuring that can be adjusted based on perceived student competence (Bonk & Kim, 1998; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Tharp, 1993). Such interactive thinking and learning in a social context is intended to expose students to alternative teaching strategies and contextual cues. In effect, with such electronic discussions, preservice teachers no longer just observe practicing teachers, but now they also reflect on their performances while obtaining electronic feedback from other teachers, adult learning guides, and their peers.

Related to these ideas about negotiation of meaning within students' ZPDs, is the notion of an electronic cognitive apprenticeship (Levin & Waugh, 1998; Teles, 1993). In a cognitive apprenticeship, the goal is to move the learner from a newcomer to more expert-like status by first participating in the community periphery and then taking on a more central role within it (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). Experts, practitioners, and mentors in this environment gradually transfer responsibility for the learning task to the novice learner as they internalize greater skill and knowledge of the discipline (Brown et al., 1989). In the present study, expert-student and student-student electronic interaction about case problems and success stories at the beginning of teacher education programs is an important form of scaffolded learning. As such, most of the research questions below stem from this sociocultural perspective.

Research Questions

As indicated, this project extends our work on electronic case-based conferencing among preservice teachers about their early-field experiences. It investigates whether more open-ended forums with designated online case conferences for elementary, secondary, all grades, and general cases could foster more critical thinking and social interaction than forums that last a shorter time period (i.e., two or three weeks). It also examines the extent to which an open-ended forum can viably support a learning community and not simply participation for the purpose of satisfying a course requirement. We expected that greater numbers of students in the conference would create more opportunities to see common problems across school sites and grade levels, thereby increasing possibilities for generalization. As in previous studies, depth of dialogue, peer responsiveness, case thread length, and forms of mentor assistance were key factors of interest. More specifically, this research addresses the following questions:

- **Case Creation and Discussion:** What conference areas and topics promote the creation of cases and case discussions? What is the average amount of case feedback?
- **Dialogue Content:** What instructional and cognitive acts are exhibited in the case discussions (e.g., questions, social acknowledgments, justified opinions, unjustified statements, case summaries, mentor feedback, peer responsiveness, off-task behaviors, etc.)?
- **Dialogue Depth:** What is the average length of response and dialogue thread? What topics or domains spur discussion? What types of questions or prompts extend the dialogue? How does peer responsiveness affect the depth of dialogue?
- **Critical Thinking and Course Linkages:** Will students justify or back up their electronic statements and claims with references to classroom resources? If so, how?
- **Scaffolding and Apprenticeship:** What types of scaffolding and learning assistance (e.g., feedback) do peers and expert mentors provide in Web-based conferences? What are the indicators of effective Web mentoring? How might apprenticeship be captured electronically?
- **Attitudes:** What are students' attitudes toward using computer conferencing and this particular tool (i.e., COW) within their early field experiences? Do they feel that COW fostered mentoring and support of their ideas? Will students claim that they have learned the material better and feel less isolated when in the field? What aspects of the conferencing tool or task did they feel fostered a sense of learning community and general learning accomplishments?

Method

Purpose

This study was the third in a series of studies on the effects of electronic case-based learning on preservice teacher education. The first investigation revealed that asynchronous or delayed case discussions foster greater depth of dialogue and peer interaction than synchronous or real-time communication (Bonk, et al., 1998). In the second study, we found that varying the amount of electronic scaffolding and feedback did not have an impact on case quality or student dialogue (Bonk, Malikowski, et al., 1998). While students noted that the conferencing tools were extremely easy to use and hundreds of cases were created within a few weeks of the semester, student electronic comments and ideas were not backed up with critical thinking and justified reasoning. In both studies, however, asynchronous feedback was extensive and students were highly focused on case resolutions and suggestions.

As with our previous work, in the present study, we were curious how undergraduate educational psychology students might make use of Web conferencing tools to discuss the problems and success stories they see in public schools during their early field experiences. Just how might electronic learning tools be used to apprentice students into their discipline? The more specific purpose of this third study, however, was to determine if open-ended learning environments that encouraged students to engage in critical thinking could foster a greater degree of course connections and higher quality discourse. To begin to answer these questions, qualitative measures, such as student interviews, were employed here.

Participants

All teacher education students who participated in the study during the fall of 1997 were enrolled in a 20-hour early-field experience, a three-credit psychology course, and a one-credit laboratory for linking their early field experiences to the course. The students who participated in the study were enrolled in six different sections of the same psychology course. In their early field experiences, students observed and occasionally assisted a teacher, typically in their chosen major. The Web experience, therefore, was meant to foster links between their fieldwork and class experiences.

There were 157 participants, including 67 elementary majors, 74 secondary majors, and 16 all-grades (PE, music, art, special education) majors. Students engaged in the case conferencing as part of their course requirements. Mentoring on their cases was received from five associate instructors, the course supervisor, the early-field experience director, two conference moderators, and two practicing teachers. Mentors used twelve forms of electronic learning assistance as a guide for responding to the students (see Table 1).

Table 1. Twelve forms of electronic learning mentoring and assistance (Bonk & Kim, 1998; Tharp, 1993)	
1.	Social (and cognitive) Acknowledgement: "Hello...," "I agree with everything said so far...," "Wow, what a case," "This case certainly has provoked a lot of discussion...," "Glad you could join us..."
2.	Questioning: "What is the name of this concept...?," "Another reason for this might be...?," "An example of this is...," "In contrast to this might be...," "What else might be important here...?," "Who can tell me....?," "How might the teacher..?," "What is the real problem here...?," "How is this related to...?," "Can you justify this?"
3.	Direct Instruction: "I think in class we mentioned that...," Chapter 'X' talks about...," "Remember back to the first week of the semester when we went over 'X' which indicated that..."
4.	Modeling/Examples: "I think I solved this sort of problem once when I...," "Remember that video we saw on 'X' wherein 'Y' decided to...," "Doesn't 'X' give insight into this problem in case 'Z' when he/she said..."

5.	Feedback/Praise: "Wow, I'm impressed...," "That shows real insight into...," "Are you sure you have considered...," "Thanks for responding to 'X'...," "I have yet to see you or anyone mention..."
6.	Cognitive Task Structuring: "You know, the task asks you to do...," "Ok, as was required, you should now summarize the peer responses that you have received...," "How might the textbook authors have solved this case."
7.	Cognitive Elaborations/Explanations: "Provide more information here that explains your rationale," "Please clarify what you mean by...," "I'm just not sure what you mean by...," "Please evaluate this solution a little more carefully."
8.	Push to Explore: "You might want to write to Dr. 'XYZ' for...," "You might want to do an ERIC search on this topic...," "Perhaps there is a URL on the Web that addresses this topic..."
9.	Fostering Reflection/Self Awareness: "Restate again what the teacher did here," "How have you seen this before?," "When you took over this class, what was the first thing you did?," "Describe how your teaching philosophy will vary from this...," "How might an expert teacher handle this situation?"
10.	Encouraging Articulation/Dialogue Prompting: "What was the problem solving process the teacher faced here?," "Does anyone have a counterpoint or alternative to this situation?," "Can someone give me three good reasons why...," "It still seems like something is missing here, I just can't put my finger on it."
11.	General Advice/Scaffolding/Suggestions: "If I were in her shoes, I would...," "Perhaps I would think twice about putting these kids...," "I know that I would first...," "How totally ridiculous this all is; certainly the teacher should be able to provide some..."
12.	Management (via private e-mail or discussion): "Don't just criticize....please be sincere when you respond to your peers," "If you had put your case in on time, you would have gotten more feedback." "If you do this again, we will have to take away your privileges."

Conferencing on the Web

With asynchronous Web-based conferencing, students can discuss case topics and issues at their own leisure. As indicated, the Web-based conferencing tool employed here was *Conferencing on the Web* or "COW." COW is organized into three different levels. At the base level is the "conference" level. In this study, we had four conferences - one for elementary education cases, one for secondary education cases, one for all-grades cases, and one for general cases or "cases for everybody" (e.g., assessment, behavior management, diversity, motivation, and multiple intelligences cases) (see Appendix A for details on the latter one). Our experience from previous studies has shown that too often preservice teachers narrow their focus to only content and issues that are explicitly linked to their area of study (Bonk, Hansen, et al., 1998; Bonk, Malikowski, et al., 1998). Therefore, the general-case conference was created to encourage students to generalize case situations and resolutions across various educational settings. In addition, this conference contained a cafe for more informal and social discussions. COW conferences can be public (i.e., needing only a site address or locator number) or private (i.e., needing permission of the conference moderator or "fair witness" to view). This conference was a private one.

At the second level of COW, each conference is organized into “*topics*” (e.g., lecture-based questions or issues such as “Learning Styles,” “Individual Differences,” “Science Education,” or “Bilingual Education”). Topics are typically listed at the bottom of the conference main page (see Appendix A) and were selected based on the instructor’s perceived needs as well as records of topic use and discussion from previous semesters. For instance, a topic called “Your Own Topics” was somewhat popular during the previous semester and thus was added to each one of the four conferences used in this study. This topic was intended to foster greater student autonomy and ownership in the case discussion.

At the third level of COW are “*conversations*” (e.g., “Challenging talented students,” “Fights in the hallway,” or “Cooperative learning can work.?!”). A listing of conversations within each topic can be found by clicking on the respective topic name (see Appendix B). In this study, conversations were initiated with student postings of a case problem or situation (see Appendix C for a sample case conversation thread). Students started conversations by clicking on the “Start New” button and entering their case problem or success story. Students replied to conversations at this third level by entering comments at the end of a discussion thread. The conversation level, naturally, was where the interaction among participants occurred. COW fostered student interactivity and choice by enabling participants to browse or read new posts or all posts, while also permitting anyone in the conference to create or reply to conversations.

Students accessed COW by typing in the appropriate URL (i.e., <http://cowbonk.educ.indiana.edu/COW/>), username, password, and then entered one of the four conferences listed in their “Hot List.” All four conferences were cross-linked enabling participants to easily move from one conference level to another without having to be at their Hot List page. Upon entering a conference (e.g., elementary education), they saw a list of course related topics (e.g., Topic 133: Elementary Physical Education Cases, Topic 134: Elementary Education Math Cases) awaiting their use. Any conversation started or response posted was time and date stamped along with the contributor’s username, thereby providing some student accountability and system tracking of which conferences and topics were popular. In addition, online help to use the COW tool was available in any of these conferences upon demand. For instance, students could request help about how to start new messages, show all conversations posted on a topic, search for a post, hide embarrassing comments, read only unread messages, or post messages using HTML code (see Bonk, Malikowski, et al. (1998) for more details).

Procedures

The COW conference was open from October 1, 1997 to December 6, 1997.¹ Students accessed this conference with a personal username and password. Students in every section were provided with a fifty-

¹ The COW project was first piloted in the fall of 1996 and continued through the spring of 2000. In the latter semesters, it was renamed “The Intraplanetary Teacher Learning Exchange” (TITLE) due to expansion to other universities and locales.

minute training session in late September or early October. At the training session, students learned about important COW conferencing features (e.g., how to use the reply button, show all conversations, add personal profiles, start new conversations or cases, etc.). In addition, students had opportunities to electronically read and discuss sample cases on assessment as well as change their personal profiles.

These training sessions helped guarantee that students had clearance to access the system and knew how to do so. During these sessions, students noted that COW was extremely easy to use.

In regards to how students were instructed to use COW, one pedagogical task was used to structure the activity. Students were asked to create two cases during the COW project and respond to 6-8 of their peers. In addition, they were asked to summarize their case discussion thread near the end of the semester. Within their cases, students were to either detail a teacher and/or student in some sort of problematic situation or to describe an instructionally interesting success story in a school they had visited. In either case, they were asked to relate their situation to their educational psychology text material, while keeping all names and places anonymous. Students were also asked to compare the instructor's actions, if applicable, to what they might have done. Finally, they were to ask for help related to the problem situation. We asked students to conduct roughly half of this work in October and half in November.

Measures

We employed four distinct measures of student learning and conference effectiveness. First of all, since all case discussions and conferencing activities were saved and archived for in-depth analyses, summary data as well as specific case discussions were printed out after the conferences ended. The summary data helped determine the raw number of cases posted on the Web within these four conferences, the number of mentor and peer responses to these cases, the average length of post, and conferences and topics of most intense commenting. Second, from these aggregate data, a sample of 75 case discussion threads were randomly selected and analyzed for dialogue content, discussion quality, and forms of mentoring. Exemplary comments, interactions, and interaction patterns were noted during this detailed analysis. Third, at the end of the conferencing activity, most of the students completed a ten-minute survey of their attitudes toward the conferencing activity (see Table 2). Fourth, some students checked off an item on the survey that indicated their willingness to be interviewed. Three months later, eight students were interviewed for 30-60 minute about the COW case conferencing activity (see Table 3). In summary, as evidenced by these four measures, there was a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures employed here (for additional information on such collaborative tool research methodologies, see Bonk and Wisner, 2000).

Table 2. COW Survey Questions

In using COW, I gained an appreciation for other opinions. __Yes __No

Please circle the most appropriate answer:

1. How much experience did you have using the Web before this class?
2. How much experience did you have using a Bulletin Board System (BBS), Chat, or Electronic Conferencing System?
3. How many hours from October 1 - December 1 on average did you spend per week on COW?
4. How many hours in total did you spend creating and responding to cases in COW this semester?
5. What time of the day did you generally work on COW?
6. When were you most active in COW?

A. Structured Questions (Rate on a Scale of 1 (Low/Strongly Disagree) to 10 (High/Strongly Agree))

1. This conferencing system (i.e., COW) was easy to use. __
2. I received mentoring and support from others in my COW postings. __
3. COW fostered peer-interaction and dialogue about real life teaching problems. __
4. My knowledge connections to educational psychology increased from the conferencing activity. __
5. I felt more personally connected to IU when in the field (i.e., less lonely and isolated), since I knew I could talk to others about it later on in COW. __
6. I'd recommend electronic conferencing for preservice teacher professional development. __
7. This conferencing activity gave me some ideas regarding effective teaching and learning. __
8. This conferencing activity fostered my generation of ideas and creativity. __
9. This conferencing activity fostered my evaluation of ideas and critical thinking. __
10. This conferencing activity fostered a sense of collaborative learning community. __

B. Open-Ended Questions:

1. What specific experiences of this electronic activity were most and least valuable?
2. What did you gain from reading ongoing conversation threads, if anything?
3. What types of topics, domain areas, or discussion threads spurred the most discussion?
4. What forms of learning assistance and support did you receive (e.g., questioning, hints)? What were the better types of assistance in COW?
5. What kinds of electronic replies (e.g., agreements, opinions, negative feedback counterexamples, new connections/ideas, off-task commenting, etc.) did you get in regards to your case(s)?
6. Did your peers give you much feedback? If so, what was it and how did it help? If not, what could be done to elicit more feedback?
7. Can conferencing tasks and tools foster new expectations of teaching and learning? How? What learning or developmental theory was especially applicable here?
8. How can such a conferencing tool contribute to the professional development of preservice and licensed teachers? Feel free to suggest any idea that comes to mind, even if you think it may sound too expensive or very silly.

Table 3. Online Discussion Interview Questions

1. What do you first think of as you remember the online discussions?
2. What can you remember about the case or cases you posted?
3. What can you remember about the case or cases that others posted?
4. What did you gain from observing ongoing conversation threads?
5. What features of the conferencing system were most/least helpful? (e.g., private topics, lean user-interface, search function)?
6. What type of task structuring and prompting did the conference coordinators, teachers in the field, and IU instructors provide to students to promote their use of the system? What were the best forms of support that you saw here?
7. What types of topics, domain areas, or discussion threads spur the most discussion?
8. How does peer responsiveness affect the depth of dialogue in computer conferencing?
9. Do you think there would be variations in the dialogue for students in field experiences outside Indiana, in other countries, or in different majors?
10. How is intersubjectivity or common knowledge displayed in electronic conferencing activities such as this one? How could this be fostered?
11. What specific experiences of this electronic activity were most and least valuable?
12. Are there new Internet tools that you think would foster new expectations of teaching and learning? How?
13. What learning or developmental theory was especially applicable here? Behavioral, Social-Learning, Cognitive-Information Processing, Constructivist or Social Constructivist?
14. How do these conferencing tools contribute to the professional development of preservice and inservice teachers?
15. Look at postings. What concepts from the class are embedded in there?
16. Is there anything you would like removed (from the tape recording of this interview)?

Quantitative Analyses and Results

Computer Log Data

As with most conferencing tools, COW automatically provided extensive empirical data regarding system usage. This information included:

- The number of people who accessed the system and actively contributed;
- The overall number of messages and average length of messages posted to COW;
- The number and length of responses; and
- The average length of case threads.

The COW conference was open from October 1997 to the beginning of December 1997. System data indicated that the 170 student participants in this study produced 319 cases during the conference with 620 peer replies and 298 mentor (i.e., practicing teacher, field experience director, and instructor) replies. Students received on average about three peer or mentor comments on their cases. The overall average post was around 130 words.

While students could classify these cases at the elementary, secondary, all grade, or general levels, more than fifty percent of the cases created were at the secondary level, thirty percent at the elementary level, and ten percent at the all-grades level, thereby leaving less than ten percent of the online activity as general cases. While specific topics were created for student conversation (i.e., motivation, special education), more than a third of the cases generated were submitted to the “Your Own Topics” category. Thus, it was apparent that students had difficulty perceiving how what they viewed in the field related to course content. In addition to these measures, the survey question responses provided additional information regarding student attitudes toward the electronic conference activity.

Survey Results

A survey of 139 participating students indicated that most of them had some experience with the Web and conferencing systems or chat tools prior to the semester. According to the survey data, most students spent a couple of hours per week in COW during the project and did their postings at various times, though most often between 6 pm and midnight. Because one of the six sections was operating entirely on the Web (referred to as the Web class from now on), student survey responses were analyzed with and without the answers and opinions of the Web-only students. The Web class had twenty students (one failed to complete the survey) as follows: two elementary majors, three secondary majors, and 15 all-grades majors (mostly music majors).

When the 19 Web-class students were excluded, there were 110 remaining student surveys, representing 50 elementary, 1 all-grades, and 59 secondary students. Of these students, over 70 percent were females. In addition, 60 percent were sophomores while an additional 30 percent were juniors. Nearly three-fourths felt that COW helped them gain an appreciation for the opinion of others.

Of the ten structured survey items, only three were found to be significant. First of all, as in the previous study (Bonk, Malikowski, et al., 1998), on a scale of 1 (low/strongly disagree) to 10 (high/strongly agree), students found the COW conferencing system to be easy to use ($t(109) = 6.02, p < .01; X = 7.13, SD = 2.83$). In addition, these students felt that COW fostered dialogue and peer interaction about teaching-related problems they would later face in their profession ($t(109) = 5.54, p < .01; X = 6.8, SD = 2.59$). However, they unfortunately did not feel less isolated and lonely as a result of the COW conferencing when observing in the field ($t(108) = -5.51; p < .01; X = 4.06, SD = 2.77$). These results held when the Web class students were added to these analyses. However, as a separate group, the Web class students' attitudes on the survey were significantly more positive on 8 of the 10 measures (all at the $p < .01$ level, except item #2, $p < .05$). Only items four and five failed to reach significance.

Qualitative Analyses and Results

Open-Ended Survey Questions

As indicated, this investigation combined qualitative and quantitative measures in building a chain of evidence about the collaborative formats and interaction patterns that facilitate student learning and reflection on the Web. For instance, as in the previous study, student responses to open-ended questions about experiences with COW were mixed. Two evaluators analyzed the comments and noted common themes. They discovered that the responses from the students who only used COW for the case activity were in stark contrast to those who used COW throughout the semester as part of an undergraduate Web course. While many of the students argued that they gained nothing from the experience and did not like another course requirement, those who had cases integrated into the Web course found the activity extremely interesting and worthwhile. The Web course students enjoyed additional participation and interaction on the Web. Not surprisingly, these Web-experienced students were not afraid to offer alternative points of view or boldly state their opinions. In addition, students in the Web class, mentioned repeatedly, that they found the candid and honest feedback they received from peers and instructors to be extremely helpful and somewhat surprising.

The students who only participated in the conferencing activity to satisfy a course requirement had mixed feelings. While these students argued that the COW case activity offered novel ideas for similar problems and new ways for viewing problems, many of them claimed that they learned nothing from reading the case threads or mentioned that they were disappointed with the minimal feedback they had received. One student, however, made an interesting comment that while students were exposed to a diverse array of teaching styles and practices, the creation and use of this huge Web-case database made him aware of the importance of teacher training in the United States. Specifically, he came to the conclusion that “there’s lots of incompetent teachers out there!”

There were many similarities across those in the Web only and traditional classes. For instance, both groups seemed to highly value the online comments they received from the instructors and mentors. In addition, they both noted that controversial situations, unusual problems, and outrageous issues (e.g., abuse, drugs, paddling), spurred the most interaction and involvement. Along these same lines, motivational and disciplinary situations were of high interest across all students surveyed.

Students mentioned some concepts from the course in their responses to whether the course fostered new expectations of teaching and learning. As indicated, many students appreciated the ease to which a wide range of ideas could be exchanged in COW. Some of the students, in fact, mentioned how they came to appreciate Vygotskian types of learning environments since they incorporated the ideas of others and facilitated cooperative learning and the sharing of ideas. One student summed up this viewpoint by arguing, “The way we all respond to each other, it kind of introduced scaffolding...since we were helping each other learn in our ZPD.”

Though there was some disagreement, students generally felt that conferencing tools can contribute to the professional development of preservice teachers. Students mentioned that these tools helped them expand and share ideas, find solutions, and learn from others. A couple of students hedged their comments by noting that the system might work best for those with genuine problems or who were further along in their teaching careers. Among the more interesting student comments were notions that these tools would offer an option to the teacher's lounge or break-room for discussion of typical classroom dilemmas. In addition, a couple of insightful students replied that with collaborative technologies teachers all over the world could be linked together to discuss issues beyond their own schools. One student stated that "(the Web) could create a mentor or support system, especially for new teachers who lack experience." Another student noted that she "would like to see this networked (system) for teachers all over the nation...to get more experienced teachers' ideas and thoughts in real life situations." Still another added, "Computers are our future. This is a great program." In summary, then, despite the varied feedback, the surveys clearly indicated many benefits of the online case learning activity in COW.

Transcript Results

In addition to the surveys, seventy-five student electronic case-transcript conversations were coded for discourse type, case components, question type, and the forms of learning assistance and mentoring. These cases, purposely representing a wide range of discussion and response depth, were chosen for content analysis. The content analysis scheme recorded the following forms of electronic discourse: (a) social acknowledgments, (b) unsupported claims and opinions, (c) justified comments, (d) questions and dialogue extension prompts, and (e) mentor scaffolding (see Bonk, Malikowski, et al., 1998, for dialogue-coding scheme). We were particularly interested in student justification of ideas and unique course connections.

The content of the dialogue was also of particular interest. In a stratified random sample, seventy-five electronic case discussions, representing about 23.5 percent of the discussion threads, were selected for in-depth analysis. While one person familiar with conferencing scoring schemes rated all of these cases, another rater scored a random set of fifteen different cases, or about 20 percent of the total cases selected. Inter-rater reliability between the first rater and the second rater was 80.3 percent.

A log of the transcript analyses clearly illustrated that peer feedback was dominated by unsupported claims (60 percent of the dialogue) and social acknowledgments (31 percent of the dialogue). Unfortunately, justified opinions and claims were embedded in only 7 percent of coded comments, while dialogue extension prompts and questions (e.g., "This is surely an interesting case. What do the rest of you say?"), were also rare (2 percent). Despite these problems and the social and conversational tone of the conferences, student off-task behaviors were essentially nonexistent. Instead, students were extremely focused on helping each other solve their particular dilemma(s). Similar findings were reported in Bonk, Malikowski, et al. (1998).

The transcripts also contained mentor postings. As expected, the expert mentoring from instructors and practicing teachers was more pedagogically focused and diverse than the peer comments. On average, in the 75 cases analyzed as well as dozens of other cases surveyed, there was typically at least one message from mentors in each case thread. Twenty percent of the mentor responses were in the form of indirect questioning and scaffolding (“...what does the textbook say might be a result?” “What does your text say about the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach?”), while another twenty-four percent of the commenting was devoted to feedback, praise, and social acknowledgment of the case (e.g., “Sarah, that’s another interesting case.”). Most of the remaining percent of the mentor dialogue was devoted to general suggestions and advice (24 percent) (e.g., “Good plans tend to help as well as...”) or modeling and providing examples (16 percent). Mentors less often relied on direct instruction (4 percent), low-level or fact-related questioning, (8 percent), and cognitive explanations or elaborations (4 percent). Student reactions to this mentoring are discussed in the next section.

Interview Results

From a pool of sixteen volunteer students, eight students were randomly selected for separate interviews using the questions in Table 3. Of these, five were from the Web class and three were from the other five participating psychology sections. Of these students, seven were females and one was male. All were traditional students majoring in teacher education. Each interview lasted between forty and sixty minutes.

The interviews occurred approximately three months after the subjects completed the online case discussions in COW. The interview questions were designed to discover which elements of the online discussions they would recall and consider important after a moderate period of time had passed. As noted in Table 3, subjects were asked open-ended questions about what they recalled, specific questions about the online activity, questions about the educational psychological principles they learned in the class, and questions about the technical features of COW.

There were several recurring themes and notable comments that resulted from the interviews. The first theme that will be described relates to the pragmatic nature of the students related to their views and uses of the conferencing system. The second theme concerns how to create engaging discussions that others will respond to. And third, issues of how and why students interacted in the discussions will be addressed. These students used such terms as enjoyable, interesting, humorous, responsive, and honest to describe the COW conferencing.

In terms of the first theme, the pragmatism mentioned by subjects in the interviews involved the challenges they observed in their field experience. This is not surprising considering the potency of some of the cases that were discussed--such as cocaine usage by K-12 students, whether paddling should be used in the classroom, and how to deal with ADHD students. Of course, not all cases were this dramatic, but in the hundreds of cases discussed, many addressed challenging issues students witnessed daily in their early-field experiences. When subjects answered interview questions about educational psychological concepts,

most of them said they could not remember the names or details of the concepts they learned in class. Instead, these concepts seemed to manifest themselves by giving the students new ways to interpret their experiences and cases they read about in COW. Subjects even commented, “The theories made me look at the cases differently.” Vygotsky’s idea of a ZPD supports this finding. Undergraduate students may be unable to grasp the labels or intricacies of a given theory, but their classroom learning can be enriched by studying theory in action and discussing it with instructors, mentors, and peers.

As the surveys indicated, dramatic or controversial cases fostered extensive student interaction. However, the majority of cases were not overly dramatic; instead, according to the students in these interviews, the quality of comments posted tended to affect the level of interaction about a case. In particular, the subjects commented that interaction increased or decreased depending on the depth of the first few responses to the case. Some responses were described as obviously being done quickly to fulfill the assignment. These comments led to low or moderate level of student interaction about the case. Other comments were well thought-out and referred back to the student who posted the case or students who had previously replied. These thoughtful comments led to higher levels of student interaction, or as one student put it:

And so, it was really interesting to see all (the) different input people had and different viewpoints that people had that I didn't have. And I think that that really stressed [to] me how important it is to talk with your fellow teachers or your coworkers and get their opinion on a situation that you just don't know what to do with it. Your opinion is not going to be what everyone else's is. In a regular classroom, at least a lot of times, one person will tend to talk or there will be a couple of people who are very interested in something and they'll be the ones who will talk for the majority of the class. Whereas in an online discussion, everyone needs to participate or else you don't get a grade. Of course, there were a couple of people who wouldn't participate for a week or would write one or two sentences but then their grade suffered because of that.

In past implementations of this project, we were concerned with the lack of depth or controversy that occurred in these online discussions. Presumably, more controversial postings would also lead to greater interaction. But as one subject noted, it was difficult to post a controversial or contradictory comment to a student you did not know. Of course, this view is the antithesis of the “flaming” that sometimes occurs in online discussions. When asked to consider flaming, the subject responded that an educational context where a teacher reads and evaluates your postings actually minimizes the chances for flaming to occur. Still there was plenty of honesty or candidness felt in peer comments.

One subject noted that regardless of whether there was high or low interaction in a case, the interactions were “choppy.” The basis for this description was that continual discourse between two or more students was minimal. Instead of interactive discourse, students would reply to a case and not return to it, so the result was a series of comments made by different students (i.e., a one-way interaction scenario where most participants simply reply to the author of the case). Since students were not required to return

to a case in which they replied, highly interactive and responsive participant postings were limited. The assignment could be modified, but since this project involves hundreds of students, keeping the assignment simple had the benefit of reducing confusion by many students. In fact, there were few criticisms about the assignment. To the contrary, as is a common theme of online learning research (Harasim, 1995; Hiltz, 1994), the assigned task or goal was consistently described as the main motivation for students to interact in the system.

Regardless of this trait of the online discussions, most of the subjects found the variety of perspectives to be one of the most valuable elements. A common response during the interviews was that the subjects read reactions and suggestions to many cases that they would not have considered. This finding speaks to the benefits of group problem-solving and learning. Reading and replying to the cases posted by others was also valued by the subjects because it allowed them a chance to consider authentic experiences that they were likely to encounter when they became teachers. Nevertheless, the subjects had mixed views about what part of the assignment they valued most. Many comments were made about how subjects looked forward to getting replies to the cases they posted, but others mentioned that they were more interested in replying to other cases than interacting within their own case. Still others mentioned that they enjoyed reading the cases and exploring the interactions but were less interested in responding (i.e., they were “lurkers”). One student, in fact, stated that:

I think this is a lot better than a journal because I've done a journal for a whole semester. I benefited from the feedback between... everybody. With the journal, you're just writing it down. You're making mental notes. On this, you're getting feedback and responses from other people. I think it was more beneficial...It was an interesting tool, and I think it should have been implemented more--make it more of a requirement.

In contrast to questions about the online interactions, the subjects were also asked to evaluate COW as a learning tool. COW is a lean system modeled after ‘The Well,’ a conferencing system commonly referred to as one of the most established and intellectually rich discussion sites on the Internet (Hafner, 1997; Moore, 1995; Rheingold, 1993). Consequently, COW was designed to make it easy to know how many new notes are posted in which discussion area(s) and how to navigate to those notes (Malikowski, 1997). In this regard, COW focuses students on the text of the discussions. It does not contain threaded messages, automatic icons, or categories of individual postings. In our experience, such additional features convolute the discussions when hundreds or thousands of notes accumulate, which is common in online learning communities (Bates, 1995; Ellsworth, 1995; Hammond, 2000; Harasim, 1995; Kear, 2001; Lupo & Erlich, 2001). When the subjects were asked what they thought of the lean COW interface, they answered that this made it easy to use and to focus on the content of the case discussion thread. A few comments were made that icons “might be nice, but I wouldn’t want to use them a lot because things would get confusing.”

After considering the issues that emerged from the interviews, it is interesting to note that student comments were similar or identical to the historic challenges of any teaching environment. For example, encouraging students to consider theory over practice and asking them to provide thoughtful input to class discussions are age-old challenges in education. It is also common for students to enjoy hearing about “real-world” challenges they may face when they complete their studies.

Of course, online discussions offer several other unique elements. For example, students could participate in COW at their leisure, as long as they completed the assignment. In addition, the simple, text-based interactions made it easier for timid students to interact with boisterous students. Based on the student interviews, however, the effects of the technology were minimal. Where technology played a key role was in stimulating student interest in reading and responding to issues that mattered to them. This is a familiar theme of student-centered learning environments. Conferencing tools such as COW provide a means for actualizing the benefits of a student-centered learning environment. As indicated by the following quote, some of these students really liked these learner-centered approaches:

I know it may sound weird, but in the online class, I felt like I knew the people better than I did in a real class. We felt like we knew everyone just because we had to interact so often. It was very cool. I still feel like when I see these people in the hall, I know who they are. I feel like I know them ten times better than anyone else I had classes with.

Conclusions

Our previous work on electronic case-based learning among preservice teachers indicated that asynchronous environments are valuable tools for authentic case creation and discussion, at least for a relatively short period of time of two to three weeks. In this study, the electronic learning environment was richly flavored with hundreds of interesting case problems and issues over a two-month conferencing period. Though the discussion peaked near assignment due dates, few problems of technology access and use were noted.

Despite the general conferencing success, there were a number of obvious problems. For instance, allowing students to “name their own topics” was motivating for students, but detracted from students’ case categorization. For whatever reason, few students found that cases such as “Motivating the unmotivated” belonged in the general-case conference. Instead, they tended to post them in an unclassifiable “Your Own Case Topics” category in the secondary or elementary conference. Why did they not see the generality of their cases? Were they wearing blinders? Perhaps having separate conferences for elementary, secondary, and all-grades students, as well as a general-case conference proved to be too complicated for undergraduate students. Perhaps students just did not see how their field experiences connected to important concepts and topics from their class.

As we also found in our previous study, there was minimal case discussion that was grounded or backed up by justified reasoning. In addition, undergraduate student mentors, for the most part, provided surface level commenting with minimal evidence from the research literature or existing theory to ground their recommendations and opinions. While this was not unexpected, it was not without some hint of learning; students must build from their personal experiences and observations in understanding educational psychology course material. Tools for electronic conferencing, therefore, should have built-in features for designating such linkages and course connections (Duffy, Dueber, & Hawley, 1998), and perhaps creating concept-based hyperlinks to case testimonials or legacies from previous semesters. In addition, when students begin to receive confirmation of their ideas and insights, they will more fully appreciate the power of linking theory to practice. In terms of other technology enhancements, color buttons or case feedback links might speed up access to case responses and also make unread comments more salient. Other features that might be built include a tool for recategorizing existing cases into different categories or an option for creating a mega-list of the 100-200 most controversial or engaging cases. Retooling cases and sample responses for later use may, in fact, be the best use for these cases.

Students, too, perceived the problems with the tools available for structuring case feedback. Student surveys indicate that when participation structures are highly open-ended, many students wait until the last minute to contribute to the discussion. As a result, procrastinating students received limited case advice and feedback and were generally disappointed. Another hindrance to student online learning is when the instructor fails to embed the activity in course requirements (i.e., treats the activity as optional or extra work) and does not model the types and quantity of case feedback expected. When teachers ignore the discussion, so too will the students; especially in a survey class with extensive readings and assignments.

Not all student comments were negative. Many students pointed to the usefulness of multiple or different points of view as well as the pointed feedback from instructors. In contrast, students not only were exposed to new ideas and viewpoints, but also were simultaneously getting confirmation of their views and a notice that they were not alone in the various problems they witnessed in schools. Moreover, there were commonalities in the ways in which the type of problems related to management, motivation, individual differences, etc., were handled. Some students appropriately noted that the ability of a conferencing tool to readily exchange and expand information was beneficial for their learning. In a similar vein, a number of students mentioned that the capability to be helped by others was extremely important.

Beyond the general surveys, data was collected from the eight in-depth student interviews. Since these were all volunteer students, it was not surprising to find that they considered the COW project to be more beneficial than the survey findings indicated. According to the interview data, case controversy or conflict was not as important to peer interaction and responsiveness as peer thoughtfulness related to early case postings or responses. When the case and initial student feedback was thoughtful and interesting,

students were more inclined to join in the discussion. Perhaps determining what is a “thoughtful” response is an issue that should be examined in future research. One of the biggest problems in the case format used in the study was that students wanted more interactive and less “choppy” discussion. It is likely that having six course sections of 170 students and four conferences to post cases caused some confusion about where to go to submit and read cases. A smaller cohort of students and a more limited number of conferences may alleviate, or at least lessen, this problem.

Despite the limited direct linkages to the textbook in these case discussions, students interviewed pointed out that the case observations facilitated their understanding of human learning and development and vice versa. Hence, while concepts were not explicitly stated, the COW project did enrich their learning. Simply reading the range of case situations and problems was critical to their apprenticeship in becoming a teacher. For some students, learning occurred in their reading and responding to cases, and for others, learning was facilitated in getting replies from a range of conference participants. Clearly, student learning was being scaffolded by peers in similar zones of proximal development as well as by more expert adult guides.

Further Activities

While we were successful in creating an environment wherein students generated and discussed hundreds of authentic cases based on their early field experiences, the large number of students and conferences combined with limited pedagogical task structuring, promoted a less responsive and interactive environment than anticipated. While the instructors asked their students to create two cases and respond to the cases of four to five of their peers, the COW project may simply have been too open-ended for these undergraduate students.

Our research team addressed the above findings and issues in a number of ways since that time. First of all, to foster more feedback, social interaction, and timely responsiveness, during the spring of 1998, we added four practicing teachers and three associate instructors as student mentors through grant stipends. As a result, there was more modeling and feedback from the instructors than in the past. Second, as a means of extending this mentoring, we limited the number of students from our university to less than 100 or approximately three classes instead of six. Third, we attempted to foster student understanding of the generality of the issues reflected in the cases by combining all different grade levels and majors into one joint conference. At the same time, we purposely warned students, through training as well as conference topic labeling, to use the topic, “Your Own Case Topics” as a last resort. Fourth, based on an analysis of more than 1,000 student cases used in previous semesters (e.g., “My student and cocaine,” “Paddling,” “Channel One,” etc.), we created and refined a set of 36 practice cases (see “The *Caseweb*” at <http://www.indiana.edu/~caseweb>). Such case legacies provided a place for students to see model case descriptions, problems, peer commenting, and potential resolutions. We also expanded our list of examples of online mentoring for practitioners and instructors to use in interacting with students. Training of

students, at the same time, was more focused on backing up one's arguments and claims as well as linking case discussion to concepts in their lectures and course readings. Finally, online help within COW was also more strategically placed for student use.

What else have we done? While we limited our local participants, during the following semester we added 30 teacher education students from two universities from Finland as participant mentors. Whereas these students mentored our students on the cases they generated on the Web, our students also mentored them. Since Finnish students could only enroll in teacher education programs after an initial degree, they were an older cohort who tended to use their greater experience and expertise to scaffold our students. Importantly, there were separate case conferences for Finland and the United States, which displayed the logos of the respective universities upon entrance. To foster cross-cultural collaboration, an international cafe was added to create a shared space for student discussions. In these student-created topics, students had an opportunity to understand each other on a personal level, thereby building intersubjectivity among participants. Such common knowledge and conference personalization was enhanced through a few videoconferences between the sites at the start and the end of the semester.

Many key results from the foreign participation have emerged. For example, COW cases were much longer than previous semesters. Students wanted to read what others from another country had to say. In addition, student discussion from Finland had greater linkages to the research literature and bolstered the dialogue among students in the United States. In effect, the reasoning was more justified and responsive to others than in previous semesters.

In the following semester, we attempted to include students in our overseas cultural immersion programs or in Native American reservations during their final semester of student teaching. A goal here was to have vertical mentoring from these college seniors to combine with peer-related, horizontal mentoring already incorporated in the COW conferencing. A second purpose was to prove that we could reconnect students to our university no matter where they may be in the world. Unfortunately, only a couple of cultural immersion students used this conference, in part, due to limited access to technology in sites such as Native American Reservations, and, in part, due to this task being optional.

To extend the range of insight and advice within COW to teacher educators around the globe, we designed "The Intraplanetary Teacher Learning Exchange" (TITLE). In TITLE, students and instructors met in a single English-based conference with many topics. During a two-year period, students from Korea, Peru, the United Kingdom, Finland, and the United States participated in TITLE. No longer was this a local or regional project. Now preservice teachers in the TITLE project could create case situations on the Web based on their early field experiences and offer feedback to foreign peers as well as obtain feedback from them. While such a project was not possible a decade ago, our initial case-based learning research laid the foundation for the extensive electronic mentoring that TITLE facilitated in the development of future teachers.

As such projects meet with success, we will begin to understand how to provide electronic mentoring and move these teachers toward expertise, while enhancing their understanding of collaborative and interactive educational technologies. When we are done, perhaps these global networkds can serve as safe harbors for preservice teachers to try out instructional ideas and reflect on their early field experiences while being electronically apprenticed into their chosen field.

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Appendix A. Example of Conference Layout in COW: Cases for Everybody

Cases_for_Everybody

Instructor: Julie West (email: Jwest@indiana.edu)

Welcome to the Early Field Experience Conference! It has been created for you to exchange questions, answers, and ideas with other students, faculty and teachers during your field experience. You can also view the discussions for All Grades Cases, Elementary Education Cases, and Secondary Ed Cases.

Some of the topics listed below are RESTRICTED to either students, faculty or teachers. Other topics are PUBLIC and anyone may participate. But Steve Malikowski and Judy East serve as "fair witnesses" to this conference, and they can read ALL messages.

Click on a topic to see how it works.

Topics:

Number	New	Topic Name
100	124	<u>Elementary Cafe</u>
101	165	<u>Secondary Cafe</u>
102	1	<u>All Grades Cafe</u>
104	40	<u>Community Cafe</u>
105	0	<u>Field Experience Tips and Advice</u>
110	6	<u>Alternative Instruction Cases</u>
111	156	<u>Assessment and Grading Cases</u>
112	21	<u>Behavior/Class Management Cases</u>
113	5	<u>Diversity and Individual Differences Cases</u>
114	0	<u>Effective Teaching/Schools Cases</u>
115	0	<u>Learner-Centered Cases</u>
116	0	<u>Learning Styles and Multiple IQ Cases</u>
117	15	<u>Motivation Cases</u>
125	10	<u>General Cases</u>
126	0	<u>Bigger Global Issues</u>
127	0	<u>Other Miscellaneous Issues</u>

[COWSearch]: Search This Conference

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Appendix B. Example of Topic Cases

Secondary_Ed_Cases topic 170

Your Own Cases--Secondary

by **Julie West** ([jwest](#))

Date: Sep. 12 2:51 PM 1997

Recent Conversations for Secondary_Ed_Cases, Topic 170: [\[COWSearch\]](#)

Number	Total	New	Conversation
24	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>The girl who doesn't care!</u>
13	<u>13</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>My student and Cocaine</u>
23	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>The girl who doesn't care!</u>
7	<u>11</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>Channel One</u>
14	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>Fragile student stomped by substitute</u>
15	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>Slipping through the cracks!!</u>
17	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Disciplining Students</u>
16	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Learning Disabled Students</u>
12	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Harriet Tubman is a Fictional Character</u>
1	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>attention thirsty students</u>

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Appendix C. Example of Case Dialogue in COW

Conference: Secondary_Ed_Cases
 Topic: 170. Your Own Cases--Secondary
 Conversation 13

My student and Cocaine

All posts and replies

1. Author: Name Removed (Username)

Date: Oct. 22 7:05 PM 1997

The first day of my observing I connected with a female student. She felt comfortable talking to me and frequently asked me for help during the two class periods I was observing. She is the sweetest girl I have in any of my classes. She is helpful, considerate, and extremely bright.

I have been back to observe twice since then. Today 10-22-97, when I went to observe today, she was not in class. I asked the teacher if she had been absent the day before, and I asked him if she had a regular attendance problem. The answer he gave me just floored me. HE told me that she has been on house arrest since a week ago last Saturday. I asked what for and he said that she waiting on a hearing over a pending felony charge of possession, consumption, and sales of Cocaine on school grounds. I was totally appalled. But what made it even worse is the comment he made about her. HE said, you just can't help kids like that! I nodded my head in agreement, but I completely disagree. What do you think, are kids like her unreachable or unhelpable?

2. Author: Name Removed (Username)

Date: Oct. 23 3:50 PM 1997

Wow! This is the kind of thing you hope you never have to deal with as a parent or teacher. Unfortunately, these types of things are very common in today's society. Young people are often the most impressionable, and very willing to take risks. In my personal view, I think that drug abuse and use need to be dealt with in a different manner than it is being dealt with today. There should have been warning signs if this student is a chronic cocaine user. Teachers must be able to detect these signs. Often times this just means listening to the students. If the warning signs are present and a teacher has suspicions, very careful action must be taken. Punishment is not the answer, and comments like your teachers are even worse. You can help kids like this!! You cannot be afraid to reach out to this student. You could change their lives forever. You need to educate your students about what can happen when you use drugs, you don't need to tell them how to run their lives. This girl is a prime example of someone who probably didn't know what would happen to her if she used drugs. This teacher could have made the difference.

5. Author: Name Removed (Username)

Date: Oct. 29 4:04 PM 1997

I can't believe your teacher said that. That's ridiculous!! Kids like these are the ones we should be trying to help the most. If your teacher thinks that the most important thing for his students is to learn what he's teaching, then he's right. I think that most often teaching our subject to students is one of the least important things we do.

6. Author: Name Removed (Username)

Date: Oct. 30 10:38 AM 1997

I agree with #5. The kids like this are the kids that we should be trying to reach! If we as teachers don't try to help them than who will? Certainly not the judicial system. I also hope that you (Username) don't let this

stop you from helping another student. I've dealt with people like that and your attention and belief in them might be the thing to turn them around whether it be now or a year down the road.

7. Author: Name Removed (Username)

Date: Nov. 6 12:34 AM 1997

I agree with Jimmy (Username). When you see cases like this it makes you realize that the anti-drug propaganda, pushed in our schools, is failing miserably. I am not saying that I condone the use of cocaine or any other controlled substance. I am saying that the war on drugs is a joke and that this child is one of the many casualties of this joke. You must also consider the fact that just possessing a certain amount of a controlled substance on school grounds is cause for criminal charges to be brought against a person. She may not have been selling but if she was in possession of a certain amount she can still be charged with intent to sell. This is a very serious charge and depending on her age, if convicted, there may be very serious consequences.

If you feel that you know this person well enough, you might want to try and contact her, give her your moral support. Something like that would be very important to her right now. She is probably feeling very scared and alone.

.....

9. Author: Name Removed (Username)

Date: Nov. 13 12:14 AM 1997

WOW! Don't even think about giving up on a student like that! I was that student (Username) and I wish someone like you would have been there to wake me up!! I dated a person that influenced me heavy about drugs. At this impressionable age I fell into this life style and wasted numerous years of my life. After abusing drugs and being abused physically for five years I finally got away from it all. I got pregnant and quick using cold turkey. Sad that it took this to make me realize that the situation I was in was not healthy, but some never get to this point so I guess I didn't fry all my cells. This is when I realized what I had done to myself and how much I had missed out on. I also hurt a lot of people in the process. I wasted my intelligence and lost all self-respect. I think drug testing in the schools is a great new idea. If I had this I don't think I would have "experimented" with drugs. My son's father was ignored and his problem still exists because no one chooses to address it. His addiction has even made him refuse to take or pass a drug screen so that he can see his child. I have seen so many people waste away because no one cares. You can't help someone until they chose to help themselves, but don't ever not offer it! As long as people like you are there to listen, things can get better! PEACE

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