Southwest Minnesota State University Teacher Education Conceptual Framework
Communities of Practice Investigating Learning and Teaching
Marshall, Minnesota 56258

The Vision: Communities of practice investigating learning and teaching.

The Mission: The mission of the Professional Education program at Southwest Minnesota State University is to create communities of practice where each learner is an active participant in the investigation of learning, teaching, and leadership processes. Teachers and learners will engage in educational theory, research, inquiry, critical reflection, and application in pursuit of excellence in education.

The Conceptual Framework Described (9-6-02; Updated 8-11-03)

The Professional Education Unit at Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) is the undergraduate and graduate faculty in the Education Department and the Dean of Business, Education, Professional and Graduate Studies, responsible for teacher licensure programs. Undergraduate and graduate teacher (licensure) candidates demonstrate the Minnesota Standards of Effective Practice and the standards of the SMSU framework Communities of Practice Investigating Learning and Teaching. The nonlicensure graduate teacher candidates demonstrate the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards and the standards of the SMSU conceptual framework Communities of Practice Investigating Learning and Teaching. The framework illustrates a relationship between learning and teaching in the context of participation in communities and the world.

Communities of Practice

Communities are social units where people live and work together in a variety of ways and in a variety of places. In communities people participate in communication, negotiation, ownership, values definition, and socio-cultural interactions. Communities of practice are developed to provide opportunities for educators to experience authentic, caring relationships. Participation in purposeful, inquiring, inclusive communities is critical for effective learning. (Banks, J.A. and...
Community members are constantly involved with collaborative projects. Over time the collaborative learning results in practices that reflect these efforts and social relationships. Practice is a process of experiencing the world and negotiating or constructing meaning out of participation. Wenger (1998, p.5) defines “practice” as a “way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that sustain mutual engagement in action.” Learners and teachers reflect upon their practices, make decisions as they implement instruction, and interact with peers. Professionals prepare in their field through reflection, both “in” and “on” practice (Schon, 1990). As a result they form understandings of instruction by generating theories about their practice; also described as “growth through practice” (Dantonio, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 1999). Members of Communities of Practice struggle with a full range of experiences, such as successes and failures, chaos and order, harmony and conflict (Senge, et al., 2000; Wheatley, 2001). Engagement is a process driven by values, doing and learning. It informs community members about their developing talents that are productive in learning to teach. Practice and community come together when people are engaged in actions and relationships that give meaning to all types of experiences.

**Investigating Learning and Teaching**

Learning and teaching are linked. While learning takes place without teaching, effective teaching results in intended learning. Interaction depends upon providing resources and opportunities to create a context for meaningful participation and practice with a focus on learning.


Communities of Practice are formed to engage learners as co-owners of investigation into learning and teaching. Community members practice reflection, self-study, assessment, collaboration, and action research. From investigation into relationships between learning and teaching, students and instructors develop a perspective that meaning and relevance are important factors in the education process. Candidates, as well as faculty, create opportunities to understand relationships between learning and teaching.
The Seven Core Values

To accomplish the mission of the Southwest Minnesota State University Teacher Education Program, Communities of Practice Investigating Learning and Teaching include the core values of (1) inquiry, (2) human diversity, (3) socio-cultural interactions, (4) learning environments, (5) belief, value, and knowledge structures, (6) democracy, and (7) leadership. Inquiry involves the use of research and reflective processes for learning. Affirming human diversity helps to support inclusive Communities of Practice. Socio-cultural interaction requires understanding and applying cultural and social learning theories in context. Belief, value, and knowledge structures mean that learners organize their beliefs, values, and knowledge and construct meaning to guide practice. Positive learning environments nurture and enhance learning. The word “environments” is plural to suggest that learning occurs in any environment, not only in schools. Democracy practices the principles of equitable and respectful treatment and encourages caring citizenship. Leadership is participatory learning opportunities and processes; responsibilities are shared by community members. A leader is anyone who facilitates them.

The Model

The conceptual framework is illustrated by a modified Yin Yang model. This model illustrates balance among forces that reflect natural parts of the dynamic learning process in Communities of Practice Investigating Learning and Teaching. In the colored model, tan suggests the diversity of communities. The green reflects growth through practice. The light blue represents the continual movement of the professional education process.

Concluding Statement

Learning to teach is about making connections between how perceptions and behaviors in instructional performance affect students, the curriculum, and the learning environment. It is with a holistic understanding that educators take responsibility (action) to deepen awareness of the importance of investigations into learning and teaching through Communities of Practice.

References: Communities of Practice Investigating Learning and Teaching


