

# the role of technology in ec teacher education: global perspectives

by Selena Fox and Chip Donohue with Rose Davies, Judith Goth-Owens, Katrina Ludeman, Julie Whittaker, and the participants of the Working Forum for Teacher Educators

## Reflections on the Working Forum for Teacher Educators

by Ellen Hall, Boulder Journey School

The Working Forum for Teacher Educators provided an opportunity for teacher educators from contexts spanning the globe to spend three days sharing stories of their experiences. Dialogue was the essential ingredient of our days together. As participants, our ideas and opinions were invited, welcomed, and respected for their contributions to a conversation that has only just begun.

Working Forum hosts, Selena Fox, Chip Donohue, and Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer organized the initiative, and then in true World Forum fashion transferred the ownership of the Forum to us. The charge, as in past World Forums and Working Forums, was to design and shape the experience so that it was meaningful to each of us, to our working teams, and to the group as a whole. As in previous Forums, we took this charge very seriously.

The conversations during the Working Forum for Teacher Educators were inspired by a series of moderated panels composed of teacher educators, who shared experiences surrounding such topics as teacher education for advocacy and leadership, teacher education in bicultural and multicultural contexts, and the role of technology in program delivery, to name a few. Discussions by working teams, following each of the seven panel presentations, were carefully documented. Excerpts from our conversations,

along with panel presentations, will be compiled into an edited publication on early childhood teacher education. Needless to say, the excitement generated by the idea of a publication contributed to the richness and depth of the working teams' deliberations.

Inspiration and guidance were also woven into renowned teacher educator Lilian Katz's opening remarks. Dr. Katz encouraged us to educate teachers as we would like them to teach, to cultivate our own intellects (she emphasized the difference between academic and intellectual goals), and to use our own best instincts, all critical to our work as teacher educators.



*Educators who respect the power of relationships and construct online learning with intentions of promoting trust and a shared responsibility for learning and fostering self-reflection, create prime experiences for adult learners. They also demonstrate dispositions and strategies that student teachers may be expected to implement in their own work as early childhood educators.*

Judy Goth Owens

### The role of technology in teacher education

The first Working Forum for Teacher Educators was held in Auckland, New Zealand, in May 2008. Working Forum hosts Selena Fox, Chip Donohue, and Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer, organized the three-day event and created a format in which conversations on a variety of topics related to teacher education helped to organize and guide the Working Forum. This article reports on the presentations and conversations related to one topic: the role of technology in early childhood teacher education programs.

Recent years have seen more and more institutions and professional development organizations looking for technology solutions to enable teachers to access



Selena Fox is the Chief Executive of New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC). She leads one of New Zealand's largest specialized early childhood teacher education institutions and is guiding NZTC's development of ecelearn, a specialist online learning environment for the early childhood profession.



Chip Donohue, PhD, is the Director of Distance Learning at Erikson Institute in Chicago. He is a leader in the innovative use of technology and distance learning methods to increase access, create pathways, enhance learning, and improve teaching practices in early childhood education.

new learning, higher qualifications, and professional development opportunities. The need for professional development in the field of early childhood has also seen these teachers and learners look for opportunities beyond traditional methods of classroom-based learning for a variety of reasons including: their inability to access programs due to far reaching locations; the challenges of managing the responsibilities of work, family, and study; and work schedules that conflict with traditional classes. When used appropriately, technology offers powerful and empowering opportunities to teacher educators and student teachers. This Working Forum for Teacher Educators conversation adds to the growing community of early childhood professionals who are seeking effective ways of using technology to support quality teaching and learning.

The Working Forum topic, Conversations on teacher education and the role of technology in program delivery, featured presenters from Jamaica, New Zealand, and the United States. Rose Davies, of the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, was the first presenter. Her presentation, Learning online: Experiences and challenges of including the excluded in higher education in the Caribbean, identified the obstacles and emerging practices related to offering web-based courses for early childhood teachers.

The next presenters focused on lessons learned and next steps for a web-enhanced distance learning mode of study from the teacher and learner perspectives. Julie Whittaker, a lecturer at New Zealand Tertiary College, and Katrina Ludeman, a student teacher who was involved in the New Zealand Tertiary College degree program pilot study, shared their experiences and recommendations.

The final presenter, Judy Goth-Owens from the United States, shared her ideas about the importance of relationships and

reflection for effective online teacher education. Her presentation, The Power of Relationships Online in Early Childhood Education, explored how technology impacts the dynamic relationship that exists between teachers engaging in rich reflection opportunities and the enhancement of children's learning.

Following these presentations, Working Forum participants reflected on issues raised by the presenters and discussed a number of important questions during group conversations:

- What support and professional development do teacher educators need to become effective online teachers?
- What support do early childhood educators need to become effective online learners?
- What barriers to effective practices for online early childhood teacher education and professional development have been identified?
- What strategies can we use to overcome the obstacles and take advantage of the opportunities?

### What support and professional development do teacher educators need to become effective online teachers?

*The role of instructor, and quality of course materials and assignments were also seen to be important factors in motivating and retaining students in an online course.*

Rose Davies

The critical nature of effective support and practical professional development for teacher educators engaging in teaching students at a distance was a key conversation in the discussion groups following the presentations. Groups identified a range of skill development areas needed to empower teacher educators including:

- Online teachers should first be online learners

- Teachers need training in how to use the online learning environment and tools
- The design of courses needs to be sensitive to learning styles of students
- Different learning styles require different modes of delivery
- Teacher educators need to know how best to help their students manage the steep learning curve

The importance of appropriate facilitation of learning was another topic identified by the discussion groups. The groups called for teacher educators to be knowledgeable, positive, and connected to the online students. Specific skills in facilitating an online class were also identified as essential, including:

- The creation of communities online
- Modeling desirable behaviors and 'talk' online
- Facilitating but not overtaking discussions
- Supporting all students to engage in the discussions and activities
- Understanding that as in classroom environments, different students engage in online learning differently

The management of time was explored and group conversations included the need to support teacher educators to manage their time and the time of learners effectively. Time management key points included:

- Time demands on faculty
- The need for teacher educators to define and model appropriate responsiveness to learners
- Ensuring learner expectations of immediate response are managed well
- Maintaining learner engagement in this self paced and managed learning environment

Conversations in the area of learning content, materials, and resources resulted in rich discussions. Content issues explored included:

- Being aware of the difference of an online content provision for learners compared to more traditional face-to-face facilitation
- The importance of creating engaging online courses to support learning for students
- Acknowledgment that early childhood programs need a balanced field practice/practicum component to compliment the content learning online
- Commitment to the highest quality content, course materials, and resources for our early childhood learners

*Everything we do as educators tells our student teachers what we value and is a reflection of our beliefs and philosophy.*

Judy Goth Owens

Conversations around the support and professional development of teacher educators continue. . . .

### **What support do early childhood educators need to become effective online learners?**

Conversations moved to exciting levels as teacher educators discussed the effective support techniques early childhood learners benefit from in their online learning endeavors. Participants shared positive strategies that have enabled learners to engage productively in online programs. Conversations around strategies that support online learners included:

- Having access to supportive orientation to the learning environment and technical assistance
- Tips to support learner's time management
- Sensitivity and an awareness of the new many experiences that learners face as they approach this change in learning style from a traditional classroom

Conversations around effective support of early childhood learners as they commence and engage with online learning continue. . . .

### **What barriers to effective practices for online early childhood teacher education and professional development have been identified?**

Technology may establish barriers to early childhood learners if not well considered before they begin their online learning experience. If identified and considered in advance, barriers to effective online learning can be addressed long before they become an issue to learners. Barriers that need to be considered include:

- Technical glitches and bandwidth limitations
- Time zone differences that can affect synchronous programs
- Access to Help Desk services at the times when students are online
- Learner technical limitations

*Difficulties at home with logging into sessions or using email at times made students feel isolated from the group and when they were finally able to log in, they felt overwhelmed by all the work that had piled up for them to complete.*

Rose Davies

Communication methods change in an online learning environment with teacher educators and learners needing to adjust to new tools and technologies to enable effective communication. Considerations raised in the discussions included:

- An awareness that email and print communication has the potential to result in misinterpretations compared to face-to-face discussions that can offer additional communication enhancements

- Communication via technology in an online learning environment is primarily in print form and therefore may make it challenging to read the tone of voice or body language
- The importance of building trusting relationships between teacher educators and online learners to support the inevitable technology challenges

*Creating a safe learning environment online for relationships to thrive has to happen from the first encounter.*

Judy Goth Owens

Conversations around barriers that inhibit online learning for our early childhood learners continue. . . .

### **What strategies can we use to overcome the obstacles and take advantage of the opportunities?**

By overcoming obstacles and creating opportunities pioneering online learning developers and teacher educators have paved the way for effective and engaging online teaching and learning options for early childhood teacher educators and learners.

*Ensuring the technology supports the relationship building by offering an intuitive, user-friendly tool was fundamental to ensuring the benefits of the online technology enabled and enhanced this community building and individual learning.*

Julie Whittaker and Katrina Ludeman

The challenge of distance is met each day as teacher educators and learners come together across the miles to create a virtual yet real online learning community.

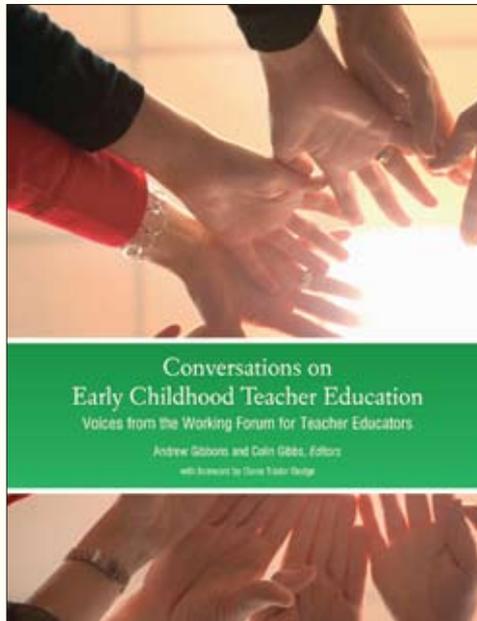
*While working together online, student teachers build personal relationships and connections that are helpful as they support and encourage each other through the complexities of daily living.*

Judy Goth Owens

# What really matters in teacher education?

What should be taught in teacher education courses? How should it be taught? How do we address the learning styles and needs of a very diverse group of students and teachers?

This book is for all student teachers, teacher educators, and early childhood professionals who choose to work for better practices within early childhood experiences and settings.



- Use the dilemmas and questions to promote dialogues with your colleagues
- Gain insight into ways that culture affects how and what teachers learn
- Gain practical strategies you can put to use today
- Let yourself be inspired

There is something here for everyone. Read, and let the conversations continue.

*This book documents the presentations, conversations, and real-life experiences of teacher educators from all over the world who came together to learn from each other and share their work at the first Working Forum for Teacher Educators.*

## Join the conversation.

[www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com)  
**Exchange**<sup>TM</sup>  
The Early Childhood Leaders' Magazine Since 1978

To order, visit [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com)  
or call (800) 221-2864.

Strategies shared to address possible learning obstacles include:

- Researching established standards for online teaching and learning and the responsibilities of teachers and students
- Understanding differences in generational learning styles, preferences, and technology skills
- Utilizing a variety of technologies and technology tools to connect with learners
- Exploring blended learning options to include the human element by combining online learning with practical face to face opportunities
- Providing learning resources to enable teacher educators and learners to keep up with improvements in technology
- Providing appropriate, effective, and ongoing technical support

Conversations on positive strategies that turn obstacles into opportunities for our early childhood learners continue. . . .

Conversations when shared are living, growing, and changing stories. The conversations held at the Working Forum for Teacher Educators are no different. They offer rich opportunities for the dialog to continue and be enhanced by new voices and diverse perspectives. Why continue the conversations? As Rose Davies shared:

*The most significant role of introducing online technology at the UWI, therefore, was the opening up of doors of opportunity for thousands of eligible students who would otherwise not have been able to realize their dream of tertiary education. The introduction of online programs has brought about a dramatic increase in student enrolment at the UWI. The convenience and flexibility of being able to participate in higher education from a home base has been enthusiastically embraced by the formerly excluded group.*

The publication *Conversations on Early Childhood Teacher Education — Voices from the Working Forum for Teacher Educators* challenges us to engage in conversations that continue to strive for more effective learning opportunities for early childhood learners.

Special thanks to the presenters whose spoken and written comments have been summarized here, and to all of the participants in the inaugural Working Forum for Teacher Educators.

To learn more about the  
Working Forum for Teacher Educators  
go to  
[www.worldforumfoundation.org/  
educators](http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/educators)

To learn more about  
New Zealand Tertiary College visit  
[www.nztertiarycollege.ac.nz](http://www.nztertiarycollege.ac.nz)