



By Cynthia Pancer, Ed.D.

Suppose you have a continuing curiosity about becoming a teacher. Perhaps you have had a different career, or a series of several jobs, but the thought of what it would be like to be a teacher, to spend your days with children, keeps coming back.

Despite your responsibilities, this curiosity about a teaching career grows, finally compelling you to look into the teacher preparation programs at several different colleges.

What would be the practical steps to qualify you for a teaching position? You may have a college in your city where you could attend classes in the evening. Or you may have heard of private colleges that prepare you to be a teacher through intensive study and classroom attendance on weekends and in the summer.

And then you hear about an online, Internet-based program. Who would go to an online university to study to be a teacher? How will the intense use of technology in your teacher preparation affect you once you are a teacher? If you want to spend your days in a classroom teaching children, is an online college the best preparation?

These are realistic questions, and it is important to think through the answers and implications. It is important to resolve your own skepticism, as these same questions inevitably will be asked by your family, friends, and prospective employers.

Reasons to Choose

The first reason to choose any college is because the teacher education program has

a high standard of excellence. The faculty, philosophy, coursework and field experience should be recognized as exemplary by other institutions and mesh with your own professional aspirations. As with any college evaluation, when selecting an online institution you should examine the program's certification and reputation, plus the accomplishments of the faculty and students.

The second reason to select an online institution for your teacher preparation should be that the quality of the online coursework and experiences with instructors and peers in a virtual environment will match or exceed the experiences you would have in a classroom. It is important to recognize that you are not substituting a lonely, digital experience pounding on a computer and surfing the Internet for experiences with real children.

Even your coursework should focus on compelling projects that draw from your direct experience with educators and students, and timely educational issues. An online teacher preparation program culminates in a student teaching experience, just as required for all traditional teacher preparation programs. Classroom experiences with children are called field experiences, which you will likely still be required to fulfill. Still, in selecting an online teacher prep program, you are really deciding to experience your preparatory coursework in a virtual community supported by Internet communication, rather than in a physical classroom on a campus where you, your instructor, and fellow students meet at scheduled times and in person. The overall requirements for a teaching or administrative credential are specified by state credentialing agencies.



How the Online Course Process Works

The process of studying, writing, communicating with classmates, responding to instructor assignments, collaborating with peers, and searching for information in the library, will be conducted primarily via the Internet, rather than through lectures and specific in-person appointments at specific times. In every course you will need to make friends, seek advice from your instructor, and accomplish assignments with other students.

In a conventional institution you might accomplish this by introducing yourself to the person in front of you at the coffee kiosk during evening break, exchanging phone numbers, and arranging a study group to meet an hour before the next scheduled class time. Or you might schedule an appointment to meet with a professor during his or her office hours. At an online college, your communication tools include the telephone, email, the course forum, and groups in the secure website.

You will introduce yourself and make friends with other students in every course in the forum. As a matter of fact, you will probably experience your courses with a peer group of other students who enrolled at the same time, and so you will be in the same classes at the same time throughout your program. You will have access to everyone in the course and your advisors via email. And all the research resources you'll need for your projects are available on the Internet. In many cases, the online university uses the same techniques available to campus-based programs, just to a greater degree.

So how will this degree of familiarity with technology and reliance on Internet communication

during your coursework serve you once you are a classroom teacher? In a number of ways, including:

1. Developing communication skills. An online teacher preparation experience will require that you develop a repertoire of technology-based communication skills that support parent, student, and collegial relationships. As a classroom teacher, you will be responsible for daily communication with your principal, other teachers, as well as parents and students via email.

You may also maintain your own classroom website, where every day you post homework assignments and reminders of classroom events. For many teachers, an hour of Internet communication with colleagues, parents and students is part of the daily routine. Explore the school websites listed here, and look for the links to classrooms. Notice that every teacher can be reached via email and that many teachers have websites where they update the homework assignments and class activities every day: Rancho Santa Fe Elementary School , San Francisco University High School

2. Technology-supported teaching strategies You will develop a toolkit of technology-supported teaching strategies when you study in an online program. Since you are learning online and naturally using Internet resources, you will build the skills to use the Internet and other technologies with students once you have your own classroom.

Whether you intend to teach music, science, reading, geography, or any other subject, Internet websites that support instruction will be part of your day-to-day



experience. And finally, imagine the reward of building technology into your program to such an extent that your students themselves design instructional websites for other students, such as this website on Feral Cats hosted by Think Quest or this virtual tour of the Rush Ranch hosted by the Geo-Literacy Project.

3. Online community professional support
Online communities provide professional support for the transition to practice. Being part of an online community is much the same as being part of a neighborhood. It means that you make friends, you share experiences together, you celebrate special occasions, seek advice for challenges and share solutions to difficult problems with the other people in your community. Your positive experiences being part of an online community during your teacher preparation program will be especially important to you as you begin your career as a classroom teacher. The first year of teaching can be especially challenging and even lonely; online graduates find that they naturally gravitate to online support communities of other new teachers, and find great support and mentoring from experienced educators through online correspondence. Many school districts provide online support for teachers and encourage their new employees to participate on their hosted websites.

Several national online services provide Forums where teachers can ask for advice and share resources, in addition to compare experiences and search for jobs around the country. Teachers.net Spiral Notebook Subject-area teachers with common interests find support at websites

dedicated to their subject, such as the Chemistry Teacher Support Group. In Contra Costa, California, the district teachers have collaborated on a website called Teacher-to-Teacher: Advice, Tips and Resources full of curriculum, help with tracking students into transition programs, and tips for dealing with the inevitable new-teacher stress.

4. Become an online teacher. If it fits into your career goals, your experience as a virtual student will prepare you to serve as an online teacher at the elementary, secondary, or college level. More and more elementary and high school students are finding that online courses complement their program at their neighborhood schools, and some K-12 students are leaping into full-time virtual school. These schools span every age student, from kindergarten through graduate school, and every school requires a staff of talented, experienced online educators to support the students in their learning. You could be one of those teachers. If you find during your online college experience that you enjoy the flexibility of working online and you have developed the skills to supervise students in a virtual environment, you may be interested in pursuing a career as a teacher at an online school for elementary or high school students.

These are just a few of the benefits that thousands of aspiring teachers have discovered while attending an online teacher preparation program. Whatever your motivation and long-term objectives as an educator, an online teacher preparation program can provide the tools to achieve your career goals.



About the author

Cynthia Pancer holds an M.A., University of California, Riverside, and an Ed.D. from Alliant International University. She recently opened and served as the principal of a K-9 virtual charter school, Connections Academy. Her career has spanned eight years of teaching public elementary school and 20 years of designing educational technology. She has taught online graduate courses for several universities, including Alliant International University, National University, and Western Governor's University. She currently serves as an instructor and course designer with Jones International University.

Resources

Apex Learning

<http://www.apexlearning.com/>

"Beyond Band: Music Technology Inspires Students," Edutopia: The George Lucas Educational Foundation.

<http://www.edutopia.org/1139>

Burke, Nancy and Phillips, Jeri Cay. "We Are One: A WebQuest for Fifth Grade on Cultural Contributions through the Study of Explorers, Folktales and Geography."

<http://www.columbia.k12.mo.us/pke/phillips/weareone>

Chemistry Teacher Support Group <http://www.csun.edu/chemteach/>

Connections Academy <http://www.connectionsacademy.com>

Education Statistics Quarterly Vol 5, Issue 4, Topic: Featured Topic: Technology in Education http://nces.ed.gov/programs/quarterly/vol_5/5_4/2_4.asp

Geoliteracy Project, retrieved June 22, 2006 from

<http://www.geolit.org/rushranch/>

"Leapin' Lizards!" Edutopia: The George Lucas Educational Foundation http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=Art_1251&issue=apr_05

Nelms, Elizabeth. The effects of a teacher-created web page on parent communication. <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/are/vol1no2/PDF%200article%20manuscript/nelms.pdf>

Oracle' ThinkQuest Education Foundation

<http://thinkquest.org/>

Petty, Pam. WebQuest: The Truth and Nothing But the Truth—Evaluating Persuasive Reading <http://www.pampetty.com/persuasive.htm>.

Rancho Sante Fe Elementary School website

<http://www.rsf.k12.ca.us/>

San Francisco University High School

<http://www.sfuhs.org/>

Teachers.net Spiral Notebook

http://teachers.net/mentors/high_school

Teacher-to-Teacher: Advice, Tips and Resources

<http://www.cccoe.k12.ca.us/stsvcs/newteachers.html>