UW-Oshkosh pilots virtual student teaching as online learning blossoms

Written by Adam Rodewald Oshkosh Northwestern Media
Dec. 24, 2013 3:24 PM

Education majors traditionally spend 18 weeks student teaching in a brick-and-mortar classroom before graduating.

But that’s not Mike Wilbert’s style. The ambitious student at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh instead spent the first nine weeks of his practicum in front of a virtual classroom.

The experience, despite a few kinks expected during a first-of-its-kind effort, has set a path for a cloud-based, tech-wedded future for teacher preparation programs.

UWO in conjunction with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction developed and piloted the state’s first virtual student teaching placement this past fall. Wilbert, whom his teachers said was an obvious candidate, volunteered as the first participant.

“I love new experiences and trying new things out, for better or worse,” said Wilbert, 31, who graduated this month after completing his practicum. “I thought it was a good concept, and it posed some good opportunities for future classrooms.”

UWO began exploring the pilot program after students in professor Stacey Skoning’s special education methods class began asking questions about the explosion of online learning, said Skoning, who chairs the university’s department of special education.

Skoning invited some virtual teachers to speak to her students. They connected particularly well with a teacher from Wisconsin Virtual Academy, based out of the McFarland school district, which agreed to partner with UWO on the pilot program.

“We know we have students who leave the program (at UWO) and wind up teaching in virtual programs, so we want to make sure we meet the need,” Skoning said.

Virtual charter schools began operating in Wisconsin in the 2002-03 school year, when four schools enrolled 265 students, according to a 2010 Legislative audit. Today there are 28 virtual charter schools enrolling more than 6,700 students full time, according to DPI records.

The total number of students taking online courses is significantly higher. Many districts that don’t run full-fledged virtual charter schools still offer robust catalogs of online courses.

In Oshkosh, for example, the public school district offers online courses for students enrolled in any of its traditional middle and high schools. Some courses are provided by a contracted
service. Others are taught by the district’s own teachers.

“We’re incorporating this into our existing systems. We envision a continuum ranging from the straight, traditional classrooms to the completely virtual. But, most will be somewhere in the middle, where teachers will grab parts of virtual learning when it makes sense,” said Deputy Superintendent Dave Gundlach, who oversees the Oshkosh school district’s technology plan.

Gundlach said UWO’s virtual school practicum is “fantastic” for districts.

“This is a direction education is going, and all things being equal, a candidate (for a teaching job) with experience doing both online and traditional classes will stand out as opposed to someone who doesn’t,” Gundlach said.

That’s also the way Wilbert sees it—a way to be more versatile and marketable now that he’s entering the workforce.

The special education major said he wouldn’t want to work full time for a virtual school, but “I got to experiment and use a bunch of virtual learning tools, and I think I can bring that into my future classroom,” he said.

Student teaching in a virtual classroom is very different than in a traditional school. The college student doesn’t have the benefit of a cooperative teacher physically nearby for help, nor does he or she have the opportunity to learn to deal

☑️ with students in a face-to-face setting.

Because of these differences, UWO had to modify its practicum guidelines for a virtual placement, Skoning said. The biggest change is the placement is limited to nine weeks. Students must complete the remainder of their 18 week student teaching requirement in a traditional classroom.

UWO will be reviewing the trial run and making modifications before next fall, when Skoning said she hopes to expand the program to more students.

More opportunities for education majors to student teach

☑️ in an online setting will likely emerge elsewhere in the state now that UWO has broken the ice, said Elaine Strom, an education consultant on the DPI’s teacher education, professional development and licensing team.

“I think we may see more virtual environments popping up, and I commend UW Oshkosh for having the foresight to say, ‘let’s take a look at this and do a pilot,’ Strom said.

Adam Rodewald: (920) 426-6632 or arodewal@thenorthwestern.com; on Twitter: @ONWAdamRodewald.