

Early Childhood Educators as eLearners

Engaging Approaches to Teaching and Learning Online

Chip Donohue, Selena Fox, and Debra Torrence

The online format of this course makes it a unique learning experience. . . . In the absence of the immediate back-and-forth of a traditional classroom, there is time to reflect on every element. . . . I spent much more time in thought over issues from this course because in a sense I felt I was always in class.

—Reflections from a New eLearner

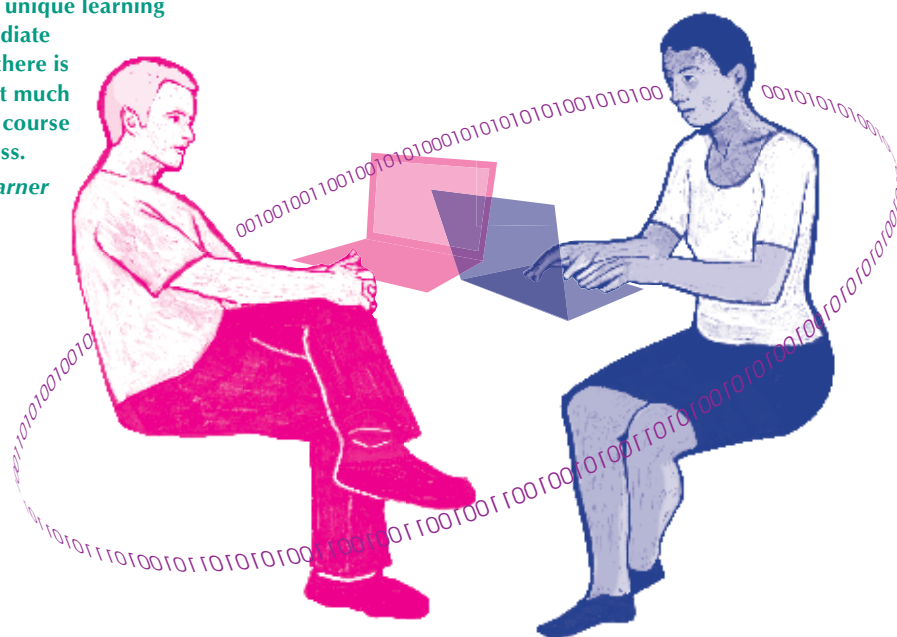
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Illustrations by Patrick Cavanagh.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS are going to class online in ever increasing numbers, yet many questions remain about appropriate uses of technology, learning effectiveness, learner support, and faculty development in this emerging environment for teacher education and professional development. This article explores teaching and learning online through the eyes of early childhood learners and teacher educators; discusses online learning standards and guidelines; and profiles a higher education institution launching an online mode of study.

Each of us brings a specific perspective to this article. Chip has been teaching early childhood educators online for eight years and will share his experience as an eTeacher and the experiences of the students he supports as new eLearners at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Woven into Chip's story, and throughout the article, are the words of these early childhood educators describing some of the effective practices and engaging approaches they have experienced in online learning.

Debra has spent many years conducting research, reviewing distance learning standards, and building infrastructure and institutional support systems for early childhood faculty in North Carolina. She provides an overview of distance learning standards and guidelines that can inform our work in early childhood

“[I enjoyed] networking online with other professionals. You can exchange ideas and thoughts with so many people at one time—you can’t really get as much in a face-to-face class. . . . Here, online, it’s just you and your computer, and you remain focused and really think about what is being ‘said’ and what you’re ‘saying’!”

and build an essential and intentional link between early learning standards, distance learning guidelines, teacher performance, and child outcomes.

Selena leads an early childhood teachers college in New Zealand. She describes the process of moving her college to an online mode of study and the ways in which eLearning guidelines and existing college practices informed the design and development process, leading to more effective and engaging approaches to Web-enhanced teaching and learning.

The article begins with the experiences of early childhood teachers as new eLearners, as told by Chip and his students.

The student’s perspective: Becoming an engaged eLearner

Over the years, I have learned a great deal about effective online teaching and learning from my students, who come to their first online learning experiences with a mixture of curiosity, excitement, apprehension, and fear. They are excited by the convenience, flexibility, and unexpected sense of connection they feel to their classmates and instructor. However, they are also very worried about their lack of technology experience and skills, and they fear that learning online will be a lonely, isolating experience. Along the way they learn to survive and thrive in this new learning environment, and they become engaged and empowered eLearners.

From my students I have learned six important truths about being an effective and engaged eLearner. I share these words of wisdom with my new students as each online class begins.

Effective, engaged online students learn

- **about technology and early childhood.** “This online course has taught me reams about child care administration but was immeasurable in teaching me to be computer literate. To me, it is an empowered feeling!”

- **with and from other child care professionals.**

“Because the students in the class are from a larger area, we hear about small town centers as well as big city centers, and about rural family child care homes.

It is surprising to me how many times we all agreed on the issues and solved our problems in the same ways.”

- **how to build community online.** “I feel that in the online courses it is easier to create a sense of community than in traditional classroom settings. With online, we aren’t allowed to be biased, judgmental, or critical of appearances. We are all here to further our commitment to our professionalism, which gives us a great sense of camaraderie.”

- **to speak up.** “The best part of taking this course was not being scared to participate. A shy person like me finds it difficult at times to speak up in a big group. In this class I could comment on everything. . . . This class

“I have put more time into the online course than any of the courses I’ve ever taken—not because it’s difficult, but because it has my interest and I want to see how people respond to my comments and what they share that could help me.”

Is Online Learning for Me? A Collection of Self-Evaluation Tools

There are many online surveys and self-assessment tools to help you decide if online learning is a good fit for who you are, how you like to learn, how comfortable you are using the computer and the Internet, and the demands of your work and family life. Here are a few samples of questions and concerns to consider before enrolling in an online class.

Distance Learning Self-Assessment, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (use ECLKC Quick Search). <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc>

Self-Evaluation for Potential Online Students, Illinois Online Network. www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/tutorials/pedagogy/selfEval.asp

Am I Ready for Distance Learning? Florida Distance Learning Consortium. www.distancelearn.org/readyDL.cfm

Are Online Courses for Me? University of Central Florida Learning Online. <http://learn.ucf.edu/1intro.html>

Tips for More Engaging eTeaching

Be intentional. Link early childhood educators and content by using adult learning principles, proven distance learning methods, effective instructional design, and enabling technology.

Understand your learners.

Plan for early childhood educators who tend to be low-tech/high-touch, nontraditional, adult learners with a strong desire to connect with others.

Remove the barriers. Address in advance the issues of access, affordability, technology skills, literacy, and the portability of courses/credits.

Prepare learners for success.

Provide a precourse self-assessment tool, offer opportunities for technology skill building, and develop “how to learn online” resources.

Make it easy to get help. Make it safe for students to say, “I don’t know how”; anticipate common problems; offer solutions that fit the learners’ contexts; and be sure help is just a click away when the inevitable technology challenges occur.

Keep it simple. Prepare a learning environment that is welcoming, inviting, simple to access and navigate, uncluttered, easy to look at, and user friendly.

Create a community of learners. Encourage interactions and peer support, enable cooperative learning and collaboration, and build a community of practice that connects students with one another.

Be a learner. Look for the teachable moment and delight in how the process of learning to teach online encourages you to reflect on and improve the way you teach in the classroom.

forces you to participate, and for someone like me, I think it has taught me a little about speaking up (or typing out) my thoughts and feelings.”

• **to contribute.** “I was able to express myself more clearly online. . . . I tend to sit back and let others contribute in a live classroom setting. I’m an observer in the classroom; I’m a contributor in the online classroom.”

“It was rather different at first not to be in a traditional classroom environment. Soon, however, it became second nature to ‘talk’ online and post our assignments through e-mail and document sharing. I looked forward to reading everyone’s threaded discussions and responding to a few. This summer, I will miss our online environment. It does become such a part of your life!”

• **to reflect.** “This has allowed me to slow down and take a look at where I am at. I have come out of this online experience appreciating my staff more, appreciating myself more, and realizing that I have really learned a tremendous amount over the past five years and that I have made some great accomplishments personally and professionally.”

For online learning to be engaging and effective, the learners and the teacher need to participate actively in the process; contribute meaningfully to the discussions and online activities; share information, resources, and proven strategies with each

other; embrace the opportunity to be a teacher and a learner; and speak up. To quote from *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* by Dr. Seuss,

And will you succeed?
Yes! You will indeed!
(98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.)

Chip’s perspective: The journey toward effective, engaging eTeaching

Becoming an effective eTeacher builds on what you already know about your content, who your learners are, how they learn, the ways in which they like to interact, and their desire to be part of a learning community. To this foundation you need to add a critical understanding of adult learning principles, enabling technologies, proven distance learning methods, and an awareness of the standards, guidelines, and effective practices for teaching and learning online.

Being an intentional eTeacher requires you to be purposeful in your decisions related to technology, methods, activities, interactions, community building, and how you present the content—and to make these choices based on the learning outcomes you have identified for online learners and in the face-to-face classroom.

eLearning makes demands on learners different from the demands in a face-to-face classroom. To be successful, online students are dependent on their reading

“It is easier to collaborate and create a learning community online because we have access to so much information and so many people who are working toward the same goals. And in communicating daily, we have been learning and talking about many different areas in our field. It has been a wonderful experience!”

“The group projects enabled me to become closer with my classmates. I really felt connected. If I had the need, I could contact them and ask for advice, as they all have areas in which they excel.”

Some Distance Learning Standards and Guidelines

American Distance Education Consortium, ADEC Guiding Principles for Distance Learning. www.adec.edu/admin/papers/distance-learning_principles.html

Joint Information Systems Committee, Effective Practice with e-Learning. www.jisc.ac.uk/elearning_pedagogy.html

National Education Association, Blackboard, and Institute for Higher Education Policy, Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education. www.ihep.org/Pubs/PDF/Quality.pdf

New Zealand e-Learning Guidelines, Guidelines for the Support of e-Learning in New Zealand Tertiary Institutions. <http://elg.massey.ac.nz/Guidelines-questions.pdf>

Open & Distance Learning Quality Council, ODL QC Standards. www.odlqc.org.uk/standard.htm

Quality Matters: Inter-Institutional Quality Assurance in Online Learning, The Quality Matters Rubric. www.qualitymatters.org/Rubric.htm

Sloan Consortium, Synthesis of Sloan-C Effective Practices. www.sloan-c.org/publications/books/v9n3_moore.pdf

Web-Based Training Information Center, What Constitutes Quality in Web-Based Training? www.webbasedtraining.com/primer_quality.aspx

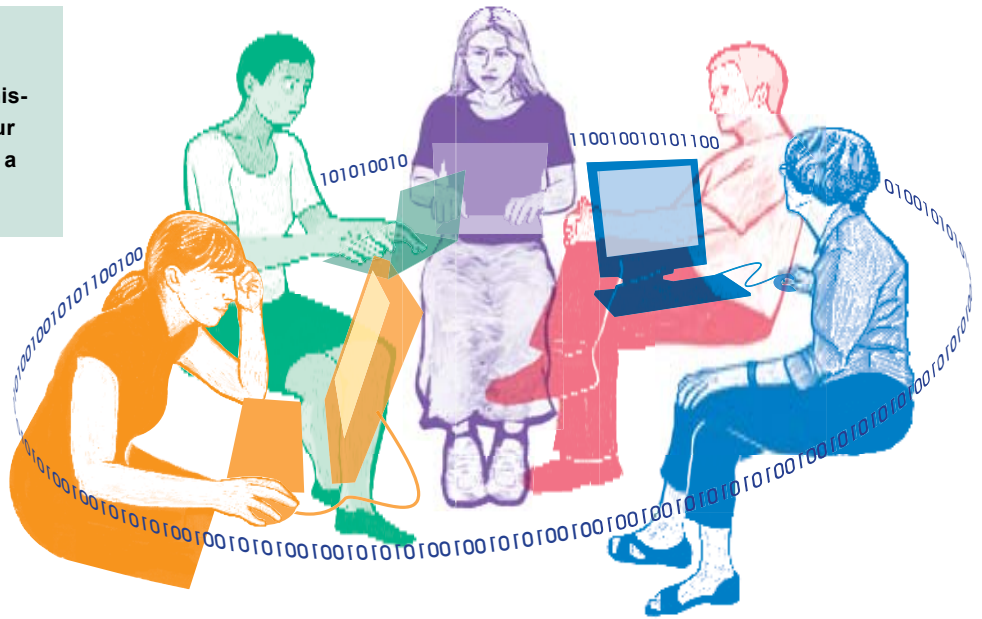
and writing skills and need to be competent working with a computer. They also need to be both independent and collaborative learners; to be able to access and use information from a variety of sources; and to be in the habit of reflecting on their practice.

eTeachers need to recognize and address the significant barriers to effective online learning that early childhood educators face. Reliable access to a computer and the Internet, basic computer skills, and feeling comfortable working with a computer are essential before eLearners begin their first online learning experiences. Otherwise, new eLearners may find managing the technology and online learning environment, in addition to learning the course content, to be overwhelming and discouraging. However, the willingness to try and the desire to succeed help new eLearners get off to a good start.

It is up to the eTeacher to provide time, before the course work begins, for learning how to learn online. The instructor can give new eLearners opportunities to explore the online learning environment, find where everything is, and play with the technology tools. This helps them over the steep learning curve and early frustrations. eTeachers who are supportive and encouraging, who offer practical how-to tips, and who model good netiquette help learners improve their computer skills and gain confidence in their ability to use technology tools for learning, communication, and collaboration—valuable lessons that serve learners well long after the course ends.



“I got to ‘meet’ others like myself, who are trying to find their way in the administrative world. Thanks, everyone, for your wonderful ideas and insights. I learned a lot from you.”



Select Resources on Effective Practices for Teaching and Learning Online

Distance Education Clearinghouse.
www.uwex.edu/disted/index.cfm

Ecelearn.com: Pathways for Professionals.
www.ecelearn.com

He Kupu eJournal. www.hekupu.ac.nz

Illinois Online Network: Supporting Online Education Throughout the World. www.ion.illinois.edu

Innovate Journal of Online Education.
<http://innovateonline.info/index.php?view=subscribe>

The Technology Source Archives at the University of North Carolina. www.technologysource.org

By knowing your content, understanding your learners, being aware of the technology barriers and possibilities, and applying distance learning standards for effective online teaching practice, you too can design online learning environments and experiences that meet the needs, interests, abilities, and learning styles of the early childhood workforce in empowering and engaging ways.

The emerging online learning environment offers early childhood educators new ways to teach and learn. I'm convinced by my experiences that we can advance the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning online by connecting eLearning standards and guidelines to early learning standards, leading to better teachers and improved outcomes for the children in our care and their families—the goals

of effective early childhood teacher education and professional development in any mode of delivery.

Debra's perspective: The burgeoning list of online learning standards and guidelines

“The most supportive aspect of online learning is the community of students from every geographical location. This alone brings an incredible knowledge base, viewpoints, and community sharing.”

Today, early childhood educators have access to a full range of online education, from noncredit professional development and certificate and credential programs to two- and four-year degrees and graduate degrees. Distance learning opportunities are offered by a variety of institutions and organizations, including traditional higher education institutions, online degree-granting institutions, professional development and training organizations, degree-granting and non-degree-granting online consortia of institutions, and corporate universities (Council for Higher Education Accreditation 2001). The explosive growth of

distance learning options has brought a simultaneous deluge of standards and guidelines for the design and implementation of online content.

The groups, systems, and organizations offering online courses monitor the quality and delivery of the materials they present. Individual providers define their own standards, policies, and procedures for online learning, resulting in a dizzying array of quality frameworks. The elements that define quality distance

learning include institutional mission and resources, cost effectiveness of the delivery method, availability of faculty and student supports for using technology, student and teacher satisfaction with the online experience, student outcomes, and curriculum development and instruction.

Despite variations among their standards, all systems fundamentally seek to build the supports necessary for eTeachers and eLearners to succeed. Instructional design is a key component of distance education quality; however, early childhood teacher educators are usually not trained as instructional designers. Decisions about the learning management system that houses and delivers the content are made at the institutional or organizational level. Thus, instructors are left to make the best of predetermined instructional, visual, and structural elements for content presentation and activities, all in an unfamiliar teaching and learning environment.

While the various systems for managing course content tend to include similar menus of tools and options, they were designed with traditional college-age students in mind rather than nontraditional adult learners. Consequently, some systems may not be as user friendly for early childhood educators nor the

content as easy to navigate as we would like. To increase access and decrease tech phobia, early childhood learners need consistency, stability, timely support, quality instruction, and transparent technology; and early childhood faculty and trainers need help with instructional design, strategies for conveying their personal teaching style, content knowledge and expertise, timely support for technology issues, and a learning platform that fits both their needs and the needs of the learners.

Design and delivery guidelines must incorporate effective online teaching practices, promote student engagement, and facilitate student use of the content. Increasingly, distance learning providers use “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” to frame content (Chickering & Gamson 1987; Chickering & Ehrmann 1996). These principles provide a basis for thoughtful instructional design, promoting best practices in student-faculty communication, student interaction and cooperation, active learning, prompt teacher-to-student feedback, time on task, teacher expectations for student performance, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning—elements of effective early childhood teacher education and professional development, whether in a classroom or online. Much work is needed, however, in developing eTeacher skills and supportive online tools at both the institution/organization and faculty levels to help early childhood educators apply their online learning in early childhood classrooms or program administration.

Resources on Distance Learning in Early Childhood Education

Distance Learning in Early Childhood Education, National Child Care Information Center.

www.nccic.org/poptopics/distancelearning.pdf

Distance Learning in Early Childhood Listserv. DLEC@ecqnet.org

Distance Learning Opportunities Catalog, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (use ECLKC Quick Search). <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc>

e-Learning for Educators, Beyond the Journal—*Young Children* on the Web, May 2004.

www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200405

A Long-Awaited Conversation: Dialogue to Bridge the High-Tech/High-Touch Gap in Early Childhood Workforce Preparation and Professional Development—A Meeting Summary, Child Care Bureau (2004).

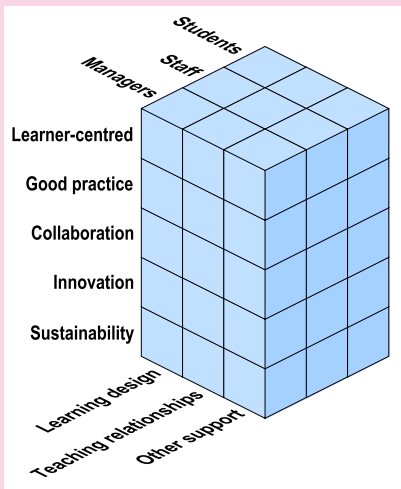
<http://nccic.org/pubs/bridgегap/bridgегap.pdf>

Technology and Young Children Interest Forum.

www.techandyoungchildren.org/index.shtml

“The online technology helped me learn. I do not do well in the everyday life of schooling, but the online technology impacted what I learned because it let me take my time and do things at my own speed.”

e-Learning Guidelines for New Zealand: An Example



The NZ eLearning guidelines inform programs about good practice, help in the design of learning, and offer a practical entry to discussing quality in teaching through eLearning. They further serve as a tool to evaluate eLearning materials, resources, and support systems. The guidelines are presented as questions to encourage reflection on current practice.

The guidelines can be accessed through an

interactive cube (visit <http://elg.massey.ac.nz/Guidelines-questions>, page 12). Choosing **Students**, **Learner-centered**, and **Learning design** from the three cube faces brings up two guidelines:

ST1 Are students able to agree on some or all of their learning goals in negotiation with teaching staff?

ST2 Do students have any choice in terms of either what they learn, the particular resources they will study, and/or the learning activities they will engage in?

Clicking on the **More** link for ST1 takes you to this elaboration and explanation, with its own links:

- Teaching staff and students agree upon expectations regarding times for student assignment completion and staff response.
- Many students will need to make particular arrangements so they get the most benefit from e-learning, and supplying them with the information in advance ensures that they will not be forced to withdraw at a later date or struggle to raise their technology skills while trying to learn the course content.
- The use of e-learning is sufficiently unfamiliar to many students, and the range of possibilities so diverse, that it is important to warn students and provide them with opportunities to familiarize themselves with what to expect.
- The flexibility of e-learning provides the opportunity for flexibility in the ordering and timing of course elements, and this flexibility should allow for negotiation and the consideration of individual student needs in the selection of deadlines.
- Institutional standards and guidelines must balance flexibility for students with the learning objectives and the realities of course administration and delivery, including staff and student workloads.

A link for ST2 takes you to elaboration of that guideline.

Selena's perspective: Applying standards and effective practices

In New Zealand governing bodies have required early childhood teachers to increase their qualifications to a minimum three-year program of study that leads to teacher registration by 2012. Coupled with the challenges of living in distant locations without easy access to accredited institutions and the need for students to continue working while they study, the demand for distance learning has escalated rapidly in recent years.

Intense research, consultation, and collaboration resulted in the development of the e-Learning Guidelines for New Zealand (hereafter referred to as the NZ eLearning guidelines), available for downloading or presented as an interactive Web site (see "e-Learning Guidelines for New Zealand: An Example") (Ministry of Education, New Zealand 2006). The key audiences are administrators, faculty (eTeachers), and students (eLearners), and the NZ eLearning guidelines focus on effective practices and learning design. Collaboration, discussion, and ongoing reflection and review, all best practices in early childhood teacher education, are key elements of the NZ eLearning guidelines.

To acknowledge the training needs of the early childhood profession, student demand, and the flexibility that information technology as a teaching and learning environment offers, New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC) embarked on a journey to add an online study option to its already well-established classroom-based and paper-based distance learning programs. Quality teaching and learning experiences were uncompromising requirements, so the college's administration identified guidelines to provide research justification and benchmarks to inform quality management, development, operations, faculty and student development, learning effectiveness, engagement, and support.

The demand for distance learning at NZTC has grown considerably over the past eight years. Distance learning is now the mode of study chosen by over 85 percent of the NZTC student body. As this demand for distance learning continues to grow and NZTC programs expand to include degree-granting status, the commitment to the NZ eLearning guidelines at the highest decision-making levels meets the college's own

fundamental mission, values, and expectations of highly effective, engaging, and comprehensive programs of learning.

College management extensively reviewed the NZ eLearning guidelines and then met with a representative of each department, including the information technology team, academic staff, student services, and administration. This multidimensional approach ensured that the guidelines were implemented, cohesive policies and processes were created, and adoption and buy-in were collegewide. The NZ eLearning guidelines offered a practical entry to discussions of teaching through eLearning, and all staff were able to contribute their expertise to the review and implementation of the NZ eLearning guidelines and the responses.

The adoption of the guidelines has provided New Zealand Tertiary College with solid criteria for identifying effective online teaching practice and an up-to-date awareness of international research. This has contributed to NZTC's being at the forefront of eLearning practices in New Zealand and internationally for the early childhood sector, even as the college continually improves eLearning and eTeaching practices for its students.

The process of adopting the guidelines has resulted in many positive outcomes. It has offered prompts and reminders to college administrators, presented challenging questions to instructors, offered guidance and focus to the project developers, and ensured that all relevant audiences were considered from conception through development, implementation, and ongoing review. Because the NZ eLearning guidelines were developed as an evolving reflective tool to guide institutions in offering online learning options, they will continue to inform, question, and enable reflection as the online program evolves to enhance the learning outcomes of our early childhood student teachers.

The next steps are to continue to apply principles of the NZ eLearning guidelines to all college planning and development to ensure that we continue to fulfill our mission statement—"to empower people to become effective early childhood teachers, who respond to the needs of children and communities by providing comprehensive and professional programs." With the eLearning Guidelines for New Zealand offering clear directions and guidance on quality standards to support students, faculty, and administration in the adoption of eLearning, NZTC is documenting significant learner outcomes leading to improved teacher performance.

Effective, engaging online teaching and learning at your fingertips

We three authors believe that online learning holds great promise as a tool for early childhood teacher education and professional development, but only if program design is based on standards, guidelines, and effective practices that ensure engaging approaches and learning effectiveness for online early childhood professional development. Those of us looking for ways to connect eLearners to the early learning standards, improve teacher performance, and enhance child outcomes need to share what works and what doesn't. Together, we can improve the quality and effectiveness of online learning experiences and have all early childhood students feeling like the two online learners who shared the following sentiments:



“To my amazement, I think I have learned as much if not more in this format than I ever learned in a face-to-face class.”

“Sharing experiences and also encouraging one another is a very wonderful way of building a community within the early childhood system.”

In the end it's not about the technology, it's about the quality of the teaching and learning, the improvement of teaching practices, and ensuring positive outcomes for young children.

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