

Before Teaching Content, We Must Connect

Linda F. Quinn & Lois Paretti

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Abstract: *This is the tale of 74 teacher education candidates whose final student teaching field experiences were abruptly interrupted due to school and university closures. Ways they continued their student teaching amidst switching to online instruction are presented. University support for teacher candidates and classroom teachers is documented. Innovative use of technology to reach K-12 students and to reflect on practices are outlined. An emerging protocol for activities is described as Consistency, Access, Supervision and Evaluation (CASE) to provide a framework for future non-emergency online practicum.*

Key Words: Virtual, Practice, Remote, Access, Consistency, Supervision, Evaluation, Observation, Preparation, Teacher Education

INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2020, all schools and universities in the state were closed. Three hundred fifty teacher education candidates were enrolled in field experiences to practice teaching and learn from their mentors and supervisors. Seventy-four of these candidates were student teaching and preparing to graduate and become licensed teachers. Developing a plan for the completion of candidates' field-experiences was a major concern. Discussions were held among all invested persons to create ways university faculty could support and supervise candidates in a virtual environment, ways mentor teachers could share their expertise with the candidates, and ways candidates could connect with their students and demonstrate their competence as teachers. Literature on learning to teach strongly supports the act of practice in classrooms (AACTE, 2010; Layton, 2015). What then happens when opportunities for field experiences are cut short? Future research will be conducted to address this question.

INNOVATION

Literature on learning to teach strongly supports the act of practice in classrooms (Boyd et al., 2008). Field-based learning is viewed as a way to better structure teacher preparation to support candidates' growth and development, (Levine, 2009), and this view has led some researchers to perceive a "new epistemology" for teacher education (Zeichner, 2010). Standard 8 of the ATE Standards for Field Experiences in Teacher Education (2015) focuses on teacher candidates having the opportunity to routinely reflect upon and throughout their field experiences. Student teachers are deeply involved in learning from their mentor teachers and from interactions with the students.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Linda F. Quinn, E-mail: linda.quinn@unlv.edu

They are beginning to understand the complex nature of teaching and learning. They appreciate and are eager to learn about teaching in someone else's classroom and to develop skills in real-life situations. The goal of becoming a licensed teacher is within reach and they are ready to begin their careers as teachers. However, the drastic changes caused by school closures due to Covid-19 in Spring 2020 forced an abrupt halt to their plans and resulted in much anxiety.

School closures affected all members of the teacher education team. The coordinator of field experiences immediately contacted site-facilitators to brainstorm ways connections among student teachers, mentors, and assigned groups of students could be accomplished. Site-facilitators contacted the candidates to reassure them, offer support, and work at expediting connections with mentors and students. After an initial period of confusion and perhaps discontent, university faculty, teacher education candidates and their mentors kept the lines of communication open to uncover ways the candidates could continue to benefit from interactions with students and practice instructional methods. Candidates assumed leadership roles and created innovative ways to continue interacting remotely with their K-12 students. They developed specific goals for each week, met virtually two or three times per week with students and answered questions. They developed lessons and projects for students to complete independently using materials they had at home through activities such as scavenger hunts and through recording readings to share with one another. Some of the shared time was used for socialization, for the students to just talk about what they were doing. Older and younger siblings were invited to join these virtual meetings. In addition, university faculty provided optional activities to supplement or replace their classroom experiences. These supplemental activities included reading journal articles and writing reflections, watching and critiquing videos of their peers and viewing instruction on the teaching channel and YouTube. The Clark County School District helped students stay connected by distributing approximately 200,000 chrome books and purchasing nearly 50,000 additional devices. Additionally, museums, zoos and libraries added to the resources for teachers and students expanding opportunities for teaching and learning.

RESULTS

Candidates' experiences during this time of virtual teaching and learning ranged from joy at their successes, to worries about reaching all of their students and the challenges of communicating complex concepts virtually. Candidates reached out to parents to help them navigate the plethora of "free" online resources. In searching for her purpose as a teacher during the shutdown, one candidate found it beneficial to support families in helping their own children learn; reminding them to give children "down time," and ways to use common household items as concrete learning tools. Candidates phoned parents and students as a way to let them know there was an open line of support. One candidate created a survey for parents to gain a better understanding of what parents needed to know to help their children learn. Candidates participated in Zoom meetings with university faculty, mentor teachers, and site-facilitators to receive feedback on lessons and share concerns. Often mentors and candidates were worried about the students they were not able to communicate with. Some were frustrated when students did not complete the assignments or participate during instructional meetings.

IMPLICATIONS

The reflections that candidates submitted to their faculty supervisors demonstrated their continuing growth as professionals and their dedication to teaching and the learning of their students. Digital tools supported virtual learning environments for candidates, their mentor teachers and the K-12 students. Candidates used Google Classroom, Google Hangouts, WebEx, and Zoom for virtual instruction and to communicate with their students. They learned to be flexible in their expectations, the importance of communicating with parents or guardians, and to better prepare for remote learning in the future. They felt the remote environment was difficult and recognized that the classroom really does make a difference in the lives of students as well as their own.

Challenges expressed by the university supervisors included becoming familiar with additional technology options that can be used in virtual meetings such as interactive whiteboards or even breakout rooms. They were concerned about their own expertise in supporting candidates' virtually and how to accommodate for grading purposes due to the lack of classroom hours and mentor documentation. University supervisors suggested they be a part of the candidate's virtual lesson so immediate feedback could be provided. They also suggested that the teacher candidates create a video of themselves teaching the lesson that they would have normally done during the direct teaching portion of their classroom lesson and then send that video to their K-12 students prior to the formal Zoom or Google class meeting. After the students watch the video and have an opportunity to listen to the new material and practice it, the students are prepared to delve more in depth into the content. This flipped instructional approach has been utilized successfully in traditional classrooms and was considered an appropriate strategy in teaching virtually. While the switch to online teaching was abrupt and without precedent, implementing best practices in field experiences remained the focus of teacher educators. It became obvious that a framework was necessary for supporting candidates in field experiences when schools and universities had to close. A protocol for consistency, access, supervision and evaluation (CASE) was established to cover future online teaching and learning scenarios when preparing teacher candidates, mentors, students and university supervisors for online teaching is mandatory.

CONSISTENCY

Since an initial concern of candidates during the spring semester was to complete their student teaching and graduate, the coordinator of field experiences allowed for a variety of performance indicators, often suggested by the candidates themselves, to serve as a substitute for their field experiences. However, the subsequent lack of consistency made it difficult to establish evaluative norms. Consistency measures are now in place to assure that candidate activities will reflect standards for field experiences and state requirements for licensure regardless of face-to-face or virtual teaching practice.

ACCESS

Student teachers were often frustrated by their inability to communicate with their K-12 students. In the future, mentor teachers will be expected to provide the candidates access to students through existing channels. Supervisors will monitor the online interactions among candidates and students to assure privacy and equity guidelines. To facilitate access, candidates and students will need to have the digital tools necessary for connecting with students. All teacher education candidates will also need to be knowledgeable about online instruction strategies.

SUPERVISION

Both classroom mentors and university supervisors will review lesson plans and be observers

during the candidates' online teaching. Information about Google docs will be dispersed to all participants to promote ease of feedback and revision of lesson plans. Feedback on candidates' lessons will be submitted electronically to the director of field experiences.

EVALUATION

Measures for evaluating teacher education candidates in field experiences are in place, including self-recording via a video platform. Evaluation measures will not drastically change, however, ways to increase the ease of sharing these evaluations will change. All mentors and supervisors will have access to a similar drop box on the university's online (Canvas) website to share and comment on evaluations of lesson plans, teaching strategies, implementation of lessons and dispositions of candidates.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the past, experience in classrooms has been viewed as the cornerstone to learning to teach. "If teaching is indeed a complex practice, and not something that individuals will naturally develop on their own, then teacher educators must develop new approaches for preparing ordinary people in an extraordinarily brief amount of time, to be prepared for the challenge." (Grossman, P., Hammerness, K., & McDonald, M., 2009, p. 289). Research will continue to address resources and timely and relevant practices that use technology and digital tools to support field experiences. The online student teaching experiences of these 74 candidates have made it possible for the teacher education program to be better prepared if school closures should arise in the future. As well, the lessons of the Covid-19 "shutdown" may serve to strengthen best innovative practices in "normal" times. What educators did to continue candidate and student learning during spring 2020 is evidence that professional educators know what can and should happen when closures occur. Research will continue to follow the seventy-four student teachers who completed student teaching in the 2020 spring semester into their professional lives as first-year teachers.

REFERENCES

- AACTE (2010). *The clinical preparation of Teachers; A policy brief*. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.
- Association of Teacher Educators. (2015). *Standards for field experiences in teacher education*. <https://www.ate1.org/resources/Documents/Standards/Revised%20ATE%20Field%20Experience%20StandardsII.pdf>
- Ball, D. L., & Forzani, F. M. (2009) The work of teaching and the challenge for teacher education. *The Journal of Teacher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109348479>
- Boyd, D., Grossman, P. L., Hammerness, K., Lankford, R. H., Loeb, S., McDonald, M., Reinger, M., Ronfeldt, M., & Wyckoff, J. (2008). Surveying the landscape of teacher education in New York City: Constrained variation and the challenge of innovation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 30(4), 319–343. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373708322737>
- Grossman, P., Hammerness, K., & McDonald, M. (2009). Redefining teaching, re-imagining teacher education. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 15(2), 273-289.

- Layton, D. L. (2015). *Perceptions of millennial teachers' commitment to teaching as a career* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville]. Theses and Dissertations. <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/1202>
- Levine, M. (2009). *Preparing high quality teachers for high needs schools: Investing in clinical education and partnerships*. Washington, DC: National Council for Accreditation of Teachers.
- Zeichner, K. (2010). Rethinking the connections between campus courses and field experiences in college-and university-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 89-99.