

We Are in This Together: Reflections on How One Education Professor Reimagined Supervised Field Hours for Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract: Educating future teachers is a fulfilling and great opportunity to share the dedication needed to succeed in this profession through field experiences. Experience has shown me that the role of an educator is to model being a collaborator, nurturer, professional, and facilitator. Through reflective practice on research-based strategies, goal setting, flexibility, and transparency, I present my reflections on shifting field experiences to a virtual environment.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, online engagement, modeling professionalism

While the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we think, live our personal lives, and work, it has not taken away my focus and dedication for supporting pre-service teachers in their supervised field courses. These unsettling times have made me a bit more humble while staying true to myself and having not minimized the goal of increasing student engagement and developing education professionals while confronting obstacles and challenges.

As an education professor, I model being a collaborator, nurturer, professional, and facilitator. I think aloud, share “aha” moments, and yes, have even stated, “I have no idea” in response to a student question about how field hours would be completed if schools shut down. While I did follow up the no idea reply with a statement about looking into the answer and went as far as sharing some resources we could look at, the weight lifted off my shoulders, the sigh of relief, was invigorating. My students didn’t judge in the frightening unplanned moment, they instead helped to brainstorm possibilities and one even asked, “Would you tell your class of young learners that you don’t know what to do?” It was at this moment that I realized my reactions would impact my pre-service student teachers for a long time to come.

Being Transparent

Letting my guard down and being vulnerable in front of my adult students that look to me to guide them in decisions about how to present themselves in the field was a bit scary at first. I often tell my students, “not planning is planning to fail.” Then, in March 2020 when we were told face-to-face classes were being canceled and were moving to a remote format, I found myself without a structured plan and fearful of how this important work of field experiences would get done.

A large component of my field supervision course is focused on modeling and reflecting. We role-play scenarios, read and analyze case studies, develop plans that will be carried out in the field, and identify strategies for how to professionally collaborate with others in field settings. It is these exercises that help my students understand their role as future educators, aid each individual to develop their philosophy of education, and prepare them with opportunities to learn

and grow. We also use the strategy of thinking aloud to promote dialogue, practice, and understanding.

As a teacher educator, I am not only faced with delivering information to my students, but I get the great opportunity to explicitly model what they will be expected to do with the information shared in their field settings. The idea of using the instructional strategy of thinking aloud can be interpreted as eavesdropping on one's thoughts as they complete a task. In a school setting, this is a common instructional strategy when facilitating a planning lesson for writing or completing a math equation (Ness, 2016). Letting an audience, especially a group of adult students that are preparing to become teachers, hear what you are thinking offers insight to problem-solving. I found myself modeling a great number of think-aloud moments during this transition to remote learning.

The Shift to a Remote Environment

The feeling of being overwhelmed was an understatement; how was I going to do this? While I thought I was a tech-savvy instructor by incorporating many videos, identifying ways to use and not use social media, creating Flipgrids, utilizing the Blackboard platform for resources and journaling, and holding workshops on becoming a Google Scholar, suddenly we were embarking into uncharted waters. So many questions and not many answers and while I am part of a larger program, the tensions were greater when we were all together as all the "what if" questions arose, and we knew we were working within an infrastructure that was not yet set up.

Subsequently, although it's a topic I usually do not cover the first week of class, I needed to guide my students to have a growth mindset (Dweck & Yeager, 2019) and to simply define it as the sought-after challenge of being resilient and learning to control what we can control to accomplish goals being set. Whether in person or remote, the hard work and dedication that is put into this field course would add to the skillset that will better prepare students for the future. Finding the language needed that would add a sense of acknowledgment, compassion, and reassurance (Ryan & Logel, 2021) would help me to create a trusting remote learning environment. The following days became about prioritizing what I had control over and setting small meaningful goals that were not only attainable during this transition but were also consistent with preparing students for working in a field setting.

After many hours and days of revamping, reformatting, and revising assignments, setting aside the face-to-face syllabus and creating an updated version to accommodate online teaching and learning was the best choice for me. I needed to come to the realization that online teaching and learning are different from in-person courses, completely different.

Staying a Step Ahead

Online teaching and learning do not look or feel the way in person classes do, and I needed to discover ways to become successful. I needed to add some resemblance of stability for this group of field students that I had first met the week prior. I had to stay a step ahead to be the best teacher educator I could be for my field students—at the same time, I kept reminding

myself of what Dweck and Yeager (2019) discussed as remaining transparent and offering rationales to students about the work we were doing.

Being part of a group of professionals that is driven by human interactions is incredible. We thrive on talking with, helping, caring for, and serving people, and developing new routines and strategies to continue this work has been enlightening. Prioritizing how to conduct field hours was my biggest challenge as I could not downplay the importance of this experience, even during a pandemic. While schools could not and/or didn't want to permit my field students in, it was my intent to figure out how I could support this type of work where they would leave my course better prepared than how they came in.

I began delving into workshops, reading articles, and signing up for courses to learn how to do this work. Truth be told here: I also took many ideas from the teachers of my own children that were in the same boat of figuring out how to transition during a pandemic. Again, I was faced with the opportunity to be vulnerable, and I did open up to students letting them know that I was enrolled in a course to learn how to do this online work better. I included them in my assignments, adjusted and tweaked some of the work we were doing, and the result... they thanked me. My students shared that witnessing me as a student and making them part of my learning encouraged them not to give up.

Developing remote fieldwork settings and experiences became a priority. I focused on the benefits that virtual fieldwork could bring such as organized virtual visits, control over what they were seeing and commenting on, the ability to replay parts to ensure we were on the same page, and the option to collaboratively plan based on what we were witnessing together, as a group. I was reminding myself that I know something while at the same time, showing my students I have plenty to learn. I was able to utilize sources that were familiar to me such as TeacherTube, YouTube, Google Scholar, and Achieve the Core; then found additional resources such as The Teaching and Learning Exploratory and EngageNY, both free sites that have many videos of classrooms to enhance the virtual field experience to ensure that students were gaining the importance of practice and reflection. This work, while not uncomplicated, became both enjoyable and rewarding.

Access to Technology

One of the biggest hurdles at the start of transitioning to remote teaching and learning was technology. I am not referring to software and course material; I am straight up talking about students not having laptops or Wi-Fi connections to complete the semester that started as brick and mortar and suddenly became online. "There are often unexpected problems that come up due to technology" (Chertoff & Thompson, 2020, p. 4). To minimize the magnification of the very present digital divide in society, I sent out a questionnaire to enable students to share with me what accommodations they had at home to make this transition possible. "Digital divide is a term used to describe the gap present in society between those who have access to the internet and technology and those who don't" (Brownlee, 2020, p. 1). The brief questionnaire I created revealed one student without a laptop that we were able to get through a lending program at the university, and the majority of other concerns had to do with sharing laptops with other family

members that were also transitioning to schooling and working from home. The way we targeted this was to find a time that we were all free and adapted a new class time to meet synchronously for the remainder of the semester. Having a time that we could all be online together was a priority for me to ensure that students would stick with the class and have me present as a resource.

My students, this group of future teachers, were working with me to educate each other. While one student shared that they were hoping to get off easy and wanted a passing grade for simply being registered in the class, they soon realized we were all about to work harder than ever. I challenged them to rise up to the occasion of uncharted territory, and they did! Albeit different, never did they share feelings of missing out on the field experiences that they originally signed up for. My students and I became each other's field settings to meet the goals of planning, facilitating, and reflecting.

Turning on the Camera

When we were not meeting synchronously, I would video myself throughout the week to offer motivation to keep going. In short five- to seven-minute clips, I would summarize their discussion board posts, share an article found on a specific topic, and sometimes bring their attention to campus-wide announcements that they may have found helpful. Student responses from these short videos were positive, and they often shared how grateful they were for keeping them to the point and focused during uncertain times.

In one of my recordings to model a science experiment, two of my children came over to ask me what I was doing. Initially, I had a “shh, I’m recording” reaction, but when they responded that it looked fun, I literally said, “let’s see how this goes” to the camera and went on with the lesson answering the questions of young children and allowing them to take part in my work. That week, so many of my students’ lessons included their younger siblings and own children and although this was not the plan, it worked. One student who shared they lived alone asked to conduct a live read-aloud lesson on Zoom using each of our younger family members to engage—this was an amazing successful session.

We found the shimmers of light and virtually observed lessons together, identifying strategies that worked in the classrooms we were viewing, and brainstormed ideas to address the challenging behaviors we were witnessing. We videotaped ourselves introducing children’s books on Flipgrid and uploaded longer videos of ourselves conducting mini lessons and modeling science experiments on private YouTube pages, and synchronously worked through all of this on Zoom sessions. This group of pre-service teachers rose higher and higher each week in their abilities to adapt. Knowing nothing is perfect in a traditional classroom with interruptions of bells and phones—and with doorbells ringing, dogs barking, kids crying, Wi-Fi buffering, we made the best of our situation and exhibited professionalism every step of the way.

Trying Something New

Conducting bi-weekly virtual field trips, a new endeavor, enabled this group of pre-service teachers to practice becoming skilled professionals. They started with identifying and researching a meaningful destination, then writing parent letters and permission slips that could potentially be used, and moved to developing before, during, and after trip lessons and activities, then facilitating them virtually with our group. These practices, while different, were definitely preparing my field students for their futures in education.

I have created virtual spaces that encourage students to reach out and rather than calling them office hours, I now do drop-ins, coffee breaks, and hangouts. These times allow students to listen in on group chats or enable them to talk one-on-one with me if they choose. Sometimes I will add a topic for the day that supports community building and emotional check-ins so students can make informed decisions about how to spend their time. I most recently included a link to “book your time” on my course platform in which they choose a time for one-on-one conversations using Calendly. This was very successful compared to the previous semester when two or three students would pop in during the week; with this I was seeing seven or eight students each week.

Moving Forward

As we continue to prepare for remote courses, the work that I have done the past three semesters is informing how I am structuring field experiences for my students. As Ross-Gordon (2011) states when discussing the need to support students in non-traditional environments, we need “to create programs and services that are responsive to adults’ life and learning preferences” (p. 28). I am more confident and better able to organize online lessons and assignments that are both meaningful and engaging. The ongoing practice of being reflective and open to new ideas will only increase as my students exhibit preparedness for their work in educational settings.

Success is based on eagerness to learn, persistence, and exhibition of due diligence in setting and achieving goals (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Being creative and embracing the tools that are available to educators have not only gotten me through this transition but have helped me to realize how being flexible and vulnerable in front of students lets them know we are in this together. Developing a qualitative study will likely be needed to gain field student perspectives on their experiences with remote fieldwork. In order for my students to learn, grow, and be successful as field students, I must continue to engage in reflective practices that include listening and acting on student needs.

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