Chapter 7

Pandemic Pivoting: Preparing Preservice Teachers through Methods Courses and School-Based Placements

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Teacher education has long presented an interesting approach to instruction, merging traditional philosophies of higher education (e.g., lecture, theory, studying research) with apprenticeship (Coiro, 2011; Collins et al., 1990; Darling-Hammond, 2017)). Teacher educators base their instruction on educational theory and evidence-based research while grounding their instruction in lectures, discussions, and in-class activities, mirroring traditional approaches to higher education. However, that only details half of the valuable instruction that future teachers receive. The other half of teacher preparation comes from a heavy emphasis on apprenticeship, based on observing, collaborating, and teaching alongside model teachers in their own classrooms. Within our teacher education program, students obtain 120 credit hours of instruction, with approximately 1025 hours of apprenticeship (also called “practicum”) from the time they enter the program until they complete their formal student teaching internship in the field as an elementary education major. This model is customary to most teacher education programs, though the hours required for practicum/apprenticeship experiences vary (Darling-Hammond, 2017). In light of COVID-19 and the sudden closing of physical school buildings, we were tasked with making immediate decisions about how to maintain the integrity of our field-based model.

In education, the theoretical framework of cognitive apprenticeship indicates that individuals are actively engaged in purposeful metacognition through experiences (Flavell, 1979). Cognitive apprenticeship and metacognition include the following components: declarative knowledge, or stating what has been learned; procedural, or knowing the steps to replicate the learning; and conditional, or knowing when to use and apply specific knowledge (Brown, 1987; Paris et al., 1983). In teacher education, the knowledge is that of how to teach (pedagogy) and what to teach (content knowledge), along with knowledge of student development and social and cultural factors that impact the classroom. Acting together, these knowledge bases help teacher candidates learn to teach effectively in classrooms with children. Cognitive apprenticeship depicts the expert teacher scaffolding for teacher candidates (apprentices) into acquiring and utilizing cognitive skills to master teaching (Coiro, 2011; Collins et al., 1990).
The model we outline is heavily focused on developing and cultivating relationships between the institute of higher education (i.e., the university) and local community partners, such as schools, childcare centers, and youth-oriented non-profits. Community and university partners co-construct mutually beneficial school and community experiences (PK-12) to help teacher candidates continually improve their preparation and develop skills needed in the profession (Hodges et al., 2020). These partnerships for pedagogical preparation follow a range of models and have mutually agreed upon expectations and requirements for candidates to ensure that theory, practice, and research are linked to maximize outcomes for the teacher candidates and school/community partners. Finally, shared accountability provides avenues for collaboration between universities, schools, and communities (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2019).

One of the greatest impacts of COVID-19 on teacher education has been the shift of the methods-based courses. At most institutions, methods courses are designated as those courses teaching specific pedagogy or teaching methods related to specific content. For example, a science methods course instructs teachers on the best evidence-based methods for teaching through experiments, engaging students in reading and writing as a scientist, and promoting inquiry-based thinking practices. These courses are directly tied to apprenticeship experiences, and as such, were impacted greatly by the closure of K-12 schools and the decision to move all instruction to digital platforms. Nearly all K-12 buildings and universities closed for at least a portion of 2020 (Hodges et al., 2020), eliminating the traditional methods of implementing practicum in teacher preparation courses.

With the sudden onset of COVID-19, suddenly, half of the course experiences, namely those centered on apprenticeship, were no longer practical to implement. As a teacher education program, we had already begun the intentionality of embedding standards for students and educators recommended by the International Society of Technology in Education (ISTE) into our methods courses, because we realized that in today’s technology driven world, students and educators must exhibit digital literacy in order to maintain productivity as a citizen (ISTE, 2020). However, the need for digital literacy was greatly magnified when schools and universities moved to online platforms. Embedding these standards became the baseline practice, and we were tasked with developing new practicum experiences for our preservice teachers while rapidly providing them with advanced knowledge of teaching via virtual and remote platforms.

In the present chapter, we discuss how teacher educators shifted their methods-based instruction online and continued to provide many elements of the invaluable practicum experiences for preservice teachers. Specifically, we examine how different instructors simulated practicum experiences online, how teacher educators managed class sessions via video-conferencing, and how teacher educators modified assignments to fit the needs of future teachers while addressing K-12 concerns brought about by the pandemic. Finally, we discuss unique challenges for different content-specific methods courses, including early childhood, science, and literacy instruction.

**Teacher Identity and Simulating Practicum Experiences with Technology**

Simulating virtual teaching in practicum courses in teacher education is not “new;” however, replacing all or most classroom-based experience with virtual options quickly became the new normal during the global pandemic (Bradley & Kendal, 2014; McGarr, 2020; Sasaki et al., 2020). Local school systems offered virtual or remote teaching due to local community spread and therefore our practicum courses existed side-by-side with cooperating teachers in
the virtual or remote setting. Problematically, yet understandably, classroom teachers who were assigned to mentor our preservice teachers and higher education faculty were at varying levels of proficiency with technology and virtual education (Rapanta et al., 2020). This created an inequitable barrier for early childhood and elementary children. Would a child or preservice teacher be placed in a classroom or course with an educator capable of harnessing technology to simulate a pedagogically sound format? How did systems and institutions ensure each student or pre-service educator receives the education they deserve during virtual or remote learning? These questions remain largely unanswered and vary from school system to school system and from university to university.

Post-secondary institutions quickly transitioned to emergency remote teaching (ERT) which is not the same as intentionally prepared online learning (Hodges et al., 2020; O’Keefe et al., 2020). Institutions created varying levels of infrastructure to train faculty to create optimal online learning courses. A colleague, Evelyn (pseudonym), who is close to retirement, laments about the transition to hybrid and online teaching:

Moving to online format elicits a sense of fear of the unknown (referring to technology) and unintentional resistance to change. I feel abandoned by my institution with little professional development beyond tips, tricks, and tools. Moving online flips my instructional design on its head. I know a structural and pedagogical shift is needed, but I am offered no guidance on how to change it. These changes push me to the brink of leaving the profession.

Many faculty members relate to the “fear of the unknown” of technology conversation. Many faculty and teachers who began their careers before the technology boom of the 1990s and 2000s may not have the level of comfort that those who had technologies as children feel.

Institutions are responding to this discomfort by offering virtual training of different tools but not comprehensive pedagogical overhaul of instructional design. With the shift to ERT, many teachers reacted with fear, anxiety, and resistance, while others perceived the shift as an opportunity to reinvent course structure and teaching and to take calculated risks with technology to benefit student learning. For our program, there are professional development offerings provided by the institution, however more effective practices emerge from faculty collaborating to plan and develop course pedagogy and content. This humanizing collaboration provides support, structure, and systems for faculty who feel less comfortable with technology. In Table 1, we outline how faculty can consider virtual tools regardless of their comfort level with technology, embedded within a practicum course pedagogy.

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<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Course Format</th>
<th>Virtual Tool</th>
<th>Recommended Use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood</td>
<td>Virtual or Hybrid</td>
<td>● Curating child observation videos</td>
<td>● Observing and assessing young children in virtual placement experiences</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>● Creating virtual family involvement videos and lessons</td>
<td>● Shadowing with mentor in virtual settings</td>
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<td>Lessons from the Pivot</td>
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| ● Integrating national webinars or modules for intermittent trainings  
  ● Conducting virtual interviews with national experts | ● Building capacity and early educator pedagogical development |
| **Methods Paired with Virtual or Hybrid Placement** | **Methods Paired with Virtual or Hybrid Placement** |
| ● Supporting teachers in the field administer lessons virtually  
  ● Co-teaching and assessing children virtually  
  ● Providing training to teach virtually | ● Working side-by-side in classrooms with educators or via distance for internships/placements  
  ● Using assessment data to inform planning |
| **General Elementary Education**  
  OR  
  **Methods Paired with Virtual or Hybrid Placement** | **Literacy**  
  **Hybrid** |
| ● Working with assigned teacher to plan and teach virtual lessons  
  ● Using small group sessions to present in-depth guidance on technology tools (peer-teaching) through Zoom breakout  
  ● Participating in panel discussions with school administrators and faculty  
  ● Preparing videos of lessons for Facebook group  
  ● Tutoring virtually with local organizations  
  ● Conducting action research centered upon the world of virtual teaching  
  ● Responding using Flipgrid to videoed lessons and social justice videos | ● Viewing and analyzing videos of practicum  
  ● Inviting cross-institutional guest speakers  
  ● Creating video-based lessons | ● Teaching via virtual platforms  
  ● Interacting in distance book clubs between preservice teachers and students |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
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| ● Creating infographics as virtual resources for parents and teachers  
● Videoconferencing discussions and panels |
| ● Analyzing video case studies of science lessons  
● Co-teaching/planning inquiry-based technology lessons through Zoom with assigned classroom teacher  
● Collaborating as a team to prepare investigations using Zoom breakout  
● Planning virtual STEM Family Night  
● Preparing virtual field trips  
● Interacting with informal science institutions to plan interactive activities  
● Creating Bitmoji science classrooms for interaction during placements  
● Creating virtual unit design utilizing virtual tools |
| ● Developing community partnerships  
● Hosting video conferencing panels of teachers and administrators  
● Providing family STEM nights in virtual settings |

The resources above are not exhaustive, but a sample of options that have worked for our colleagues within our teacher preparation program. The content and course objectives are constant, but how faculty provide the students with interactive, meaningful learning experiences has shifted as we pivot in the pandemic.

Practicum experiences are intended for the live, in-person classroom setting. However, our capacity for innovation is only limited by our perspective, our technology capacity, and our knowledge base. We could choose to transition our courses online without changing content or structure, but at what cost? On the other hand, re-imagining courses takes time and effort, and without institutional support, faculty members are left to re-construct a better experience for students on their own metaphoric dime and time. We view the “pandemic pivoting” as an opportunity, an opportunity to add programmatic changes that were not possible previously. We choose to widen our perspective, stretch our faculty’s bounds with technology, and utilize our networks as we pivot to provide the best experiences possible for practicum students. If our
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perspective is bound to field-based, classroom-based opportunities, then we set our students up for a potentially disappointing term. We choose to perceive the challenges that face our preservice students’ field experiences as an opportunity to broaden our reach and our virtual impact (e.g., statewide, nationally, internationally), as well as to craft many experiences that may linger far beyond the pandemic itself. Creating virtual, sustainable partnerships with colleagues and communities offers mutual benefits.

Maintaining Practicum Models through Community Partnerships

University/school/community partnerships have long been a cornerstone of teacher preparation programs (Hodges et al., 2020). A goal of such partnerships is to establish a collaborative and transparent relationship between community and school stakeholders, along with higher education institutions, in order to meet the educational needs of all involved (University of Alabama School Partnerships, 2018). These partnerships can be innovative and provide a vehicle for fundamental development of preservice teachers, while also serving as a catalyst for professional development among practicing teachers. Moreover, these collaborations may provide extended opportunities for family involvement within local communities.

In educational partnerships, it is critical to consider equitable distribution of resources so that the diverse needs of different types of schools are satisfied instead of focusing only on affluent educational settings. Higher education institutions often have a strategic approach to engaging preservice teachers and faculty in community partnerships, so a gap in social capital among districts and types of schools is prevented (Birdwell-Mitchell, 2019). Such endeavors are also critical as teacher identity can be positively or negatively impacted by the context where novice educators and veterans attempt to navigate and modify their identities as they move through different settings and contexts, assimilating themselves and situating their ideologies about teaching and learning while also trying to maintain professional relationships. In a sense, the context where teachers practice can make them vulnerable and alter their teacher identity (Avraamidou, 2019).

This issue of equity in school partnerships, while seemingly easy to accomplish, becomes increasingly challenging during a pandemic. Physical school buildings provide resources to teachers, families, and students such as security, food, wellness, exercise, socialization, and other needed resources. Moreover, school buildings that once were used as sites for community outreach and innovative practicum experiences are no longer usable for those purposes. Schools that were once a hub for preservice teacher development, in-service teacher professional development, and community events now stand somewhat silent and deserted. However, while the buildings are vacated, for the most part, the needs of the children, educators, administrators, and the surrounding communities have been exponentially magnified.

These realities of closing physical school buildings while maintaining robust educational experiences in virtual and remote settings leads to the question of how to maintain and reimagine partnerships. In this new model, teaching is occurring largely online or in socially-distanced formats where only a small portion of students are allowed on campus at one time, and the doors have been closed to guests who were once welcome to join in the educational endeavors. Thus, partnerships must be reimagined to meet the new crisis presented by COVID-19.
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Through much collaboration, we sustained and even enhanced university/school/community partnerships that provide reciprocity among stakeholders. Preservice teachers have become co-curriculum developers, as they work with their assigned practicing classroom teacher to develop and teach online lessons that can meet the needs of children working from home in a virtual environment. In many cases, preservice teachers provide a buffer between veteran educators and new technologies, easing the feelings of inadequacy. As undergraduate students and teachers work together to share the development and teaching of lessons, a strong collaboration occurs. Additionally, administrators and veteran educators have participated in virtual panels, providing tips for interviewing, securing a job, and navigating the first year of teaching.

While the aforementioned approaches to teaching during the pandemic have proven valuable, meeting the needs of the community has also been reconceptualized. Families often struggle with filling the gaps in providing educational opportunities for their children while keeping them safe. To address this problem, we reimagined our approach to community outreach. Family involvement in a child’s education leads to greater success for the child (Mendez & Swick, 2018). Therefore, we have provided opportunities for virtual tutoring, virtual teaching, and social media platforms that distribute video-prepared lessons.

Additionally, we prepared a Virtual Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Family Week to supplement a previously held STEM Family Night that serviced between 500 and 600 families and community members annually. The benefits of this event have been immeasurable and many members in the school and community anticipate it with excitement. Through the virtual experience, we will cast a wider net to reach schools all over the state, rather than just focusing on those within about 100 miles of our institution. Students and their families will be invited to attend virtually by Zoom, as preservice students in their science methods course engage in inquiry-based STEM challenges. A list of simple household materials and a description of each virtual station, along with the scheduled time of the station and Zoom link, were provided. The children and their families gathered the common household items needed in order to participate from their homes as the preservice teachers guided them through the STEM challenges, asking for participation in problem-solving, predicting, building, investigating, inventing, and answering questions. The goal was that by providing many virtual stations each night, families could seize the opportunity to interact with their children while learning science. Issues of equity still present a challenge as we seek to find innovative ways to share this event with families who may have limited access to technology and other resources, but we hope to solve some of these issues through collaborative efforts with community stakeholders. Local businesses and libraries were invited to donate supplies and to create socially-distanced spaces where family members can safely access technology. Reaching out to schools, businesses, and libraries statewide can help prevent social capital inequalities (Birdwell-Mitchell, 2019).

Humanizing Pedagogy During Crisis

At the heart of shifting our practice is a strong focus on the human experience - that of both teachers and students, as well as parents and other education stakeholders. In 2020, these individuals may feel unmoored by the unanswerable and moment-by-moment changes. Our perspectives above and the models of supporting future and current teachers and their students are based in easing those tensions and bringing steadfastness to in-person, virtual, remote, and distance (and every combination of those) education.
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Humanizing pedagogy is empowering and provides agency to the individuals it affects. For example, rather than viewing the current changes and shifts as happening to us, we view the current shifts as opportunities to push boundaries, call for improvements, and take advantage of the vast and endless possibilities presented. New collaborations with community organizations and developing practicum experiences outside of the local environment are opportunities to prepare teachers for more diverse expectations while providing educational experience to diverse populations of students.

As with everything during the current pivot, challenges are ever-present, but opportunities are also here to stay. We advocate for focusing on the opportunities and using them to expand creative, engaging, and effective options for practicum and methods-based experiences for future teachers. Rather than asking, “what limitations are put upon us?” ask, “what can we do that we did not have an option to do before?” For us, this has led to extended community partners across a large state, reaching populations that were previously exempt from our support, as well as focusing on what experts in the field can share with our future teachers. We also view ourselves and our future teachers as resources that other teachers, schools, and communities can turn to for help during this time. We hope these opportunities become the currency of education and continue to move us toward more inclusivity and providing the best educational opportunities possible for all children.

References


