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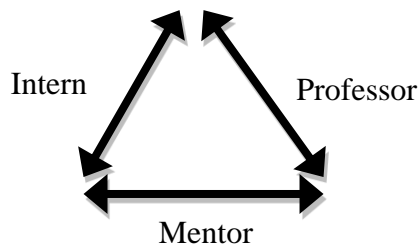
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A Case for an Online Educational Administrator Practicum Experience

*Texas Council of Professors of Educational Administration*ⁱ

The principal and superintendent practicum experiences have traditionally been entirely face-to-face (f2f) between university professors, interns and site mentors – typically a campus or district administrator (Figure 1). Advancements in technology combined with the exponential growth of online graduate programs give rise to additional incorporation of technology into the practicum experience.

Figure 1.1: The Practicum Team



The Texas Education Agency’s (TEA) Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN) is moving forward with online K-12 course development using the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) standards for quality and consistency of online teaching and learning. The iNACOL standards include strategies requiring students to take an active role in learning, to have multiple competency-based pathways for learning, and pursue more effective use of experts and resources. The iNACOL standards also seek to “coordinate student learning through the expanded use of technology-based tools and to create a highly flexible schedule, with instruction possible 24x7” (iNACOL, 2012, p. 6). Likewise, those who lead schools in the 21st century must also be literate in online teaching and learning strategies to lead these K-12 schools. The practicum experience provides an excellent opportunity for future school leaders to enhance their use and understanding of technologies for teaching and learning while pursuing their graduate studies in educational administration.

Technology has changed faster than policy – in this case Texas Administrative Code (TAC) Rule §228.35 as applied to the principal and superintendent graduate programs. TAC Rule §228.35 is also problematic when applied to the principal and superintendent practicums. Its language is more developmentally appropriate and practical for the student teacher field experience than for the principal and superintendent practicums. This Texas Council of Professors of Educational Administration (TCPEA) white paper examines the use of technology in the practicum experience for principal and superintendent preparation programs.

Hewitt, Lashley, Mullen, and Davis (2012) aptly describe the situation universities and their faculties are confronting when they wrote,

ⁱ **Dr. Lloyd Goldsmith** compiled this Position Paper on behalf of the TCPEA Executive Board. He may be contacted at lloyd.goldsmith@acu.edu.

The traditional model most of us have experienced was a regimen of courses delivered face-to-face over an entire semester and held in a physical building space, such as a lecture hall or conference room. This model of education is quickly becoming anachronistic. The infusion of new instructional delivery technologies and online/virtual configurations for enhanced classroom practice and student satisfaction are game-changing catalysts. A new era of technology learning and proficiency in higher education has been ushered in. (p.3)

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2011) defined practicum as,

a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Practicums give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent. (para. 1)

In the Texas graduate educational administration school environment this student is typically a teacher or administrator gaining practical experience and as part of the principal or superintendent certification process. Historically the experience has been normally limited to a series of three physical onsite visits.

Online graduate programs have gained popularity with educators seeking graduate study because they provide flexible access to content and instruction at any time, from any location. Today's practicum, like today's online courses must take advantage of technologies not readily available less than ten years ago and in many cases much recently (Panos, 2005). The efficacy of a practicum experience incorporating technology must be revisited given today's enhanced online learning applications. The wide range of Web resources goes beyond multimedia resources to include Web-based applications and new collaboration technologies. Today's telecommunication tools are radically different from their predecessors that were expensive, difficult to construct and to maintain (Abel, 1960; Hoy & Merkley, 1989).

Technology should be effectively incorporated in the principal and superintendent practicums as it has been in the social sciences and medicine providing a rich and meaningful way of replicating, as well as enhancing processes in the traditional f2f practicum. Technology overcomes the limitations of the traditional f2f practicum process within the rapidly expanding demand for online graduate education.

The traditional f2f practicum team (intern, professor, and mentor) and the practicum team utilizing technology contain the same team members. However, practicum teams using technology, like other virtual teams, have the capacity to operate in a greater geographically dispersed area (Horwitz, Bravington, & Silvis, 2006). Like their f2f counterparts, virtual practicum teams work interdependently, use information technologies, share responsibilities and meet together (Wells, 2006). Not surprising, Karayaz (2006) noted that communication was instrumental in virtual teams meeting with success. Earnhardt (2009) identified speed of execution, reduced cost and adaptability as virtual team advantages.

The practicum provides the graduate student with the opportunity to gain real world experience by integrating the knowledge learned in graduate studies with on the job training and experience. Many tools are available for faculty and staff in the virtual practicum. These tools include but are not limited to: email, instant messaging, Google+ video chat or other audio/visual conferencing software such as Skype, webinars, SMS (text) messaging, and all other manner of virtual communication. These tools assist in building and supporting a community of learners necessary for understanding application of a complex body of knowledge (Bransford, Brown & Cocking 1999; Riel & Polin 2004; Schwen & Hara 2004).

Widespread interest exists in the application of videoconferencing in education, health care, and business (Wilson, Marks, Collins, Warner, & Frick, 2004). It is used in teaching and supervising medical procedures (Miller, Alam, Fraser, & Ferguson, 2008). Videoconferencing is attributed to developing partnerships between peers in educational institutions both on- and off-site (Daley, Spalla, Arndt, & Warnes, 2008; Zerr & Pulcher, 2008).

Videoconferencing is employed successfully in social work field practicums (Panos, 2005). It is an increasingly valuable tool in psychiatry and has overwhelmingly positive reports on assessment and treatment in personal care. Little evidence is reported on a negative impact on rapport between patient and clinicians. The rapid improvement of technology makes videoconferencing more affordable, feasible and accessible (Sharp, Kobak, & Osman, 2011).

A disadvantage of videoconferencing focused on conversations that were sensitive and difficult having “a lack of physical presence might have a negative impact on the degree of sharing” (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009, p. 7). However the researchers concluded overall, “videoconferencing proved to be an excellent medium to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants who were geographically dispersed” (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009, p. 8).

Advantages for Interns

Integrating technology into the practicum contains advantages for today’s graduate intern. These advantages include:

Flexibility

The online practicum is always open. It provides real time feedback and supports individualized instruction. The asynchronous design of the online practicum provides greater flexibility. Multiple pathways exist for students to complete the practicum while having greater freedom from a rigid calendar.

Low cost

Eliminating travel costs associated with physical site visits will lower costs, saving students money by reducing program costs. A side benefit of eliminating or significantly reducing the need for physical site visits is a reduction in size of the university’s carbon footprint.

Time management

Using a highly flexible schedule with seamless access to the online practicum offers students greater flexibility in managing their time to meet not only their practicum needs but in other needs in their public and private lives.

Communication

Time and space are diminished as factors impeding communication. Richest communication occurs in the face-to-face medium because verbal and visual cues provide immediate feedback and the use of natural language (Canon & Griffith, 2007; Green, 2012; Hoy & Miskel, 2012; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2011; Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009; Ubben, Hughes & Norris, 2010). Rich virtual oral/visual communication is replicated in the practicum by incorporating such tools as Skype and Google+ hangouts and circles (Skype and Google+ video chat are used as representative software. Other software provides similar services.). Students have greater opportunity for f2f conversations with their university professors in practicum matters.

Networking

Students meeting with their university professors in online practicum groups using applications such as Google+ video chat hangout have opportunity to meet and know students beyond their geographic location. Google+ video chat hangout allows up to ten individuals to hangout in a group with audio and video feeds. All hangout participants see and hear each other on their computer monitors. Participants have the capability of sharing each other's computer screens. Students can readily explore similarities and differences in issues on their campuses with fellow students and others in the field throughout Texas. Students can compare their experiences with graduate students from Texas, the United States and foreign countries providing a broader understanding of educational leadership beyond narrow experiences in a limited community. Skype or Google+ hangouts and circles provide excellent digital forums for online practicum students to network with each other. This social networking enlarges students' professional network.

Virtual skills

Students learn technological skills in the practicum that transfer to the school setting as Texas moves forward with implementing technology in its public schools. These virtual skills align with the TEA stance to use "appropriate Social Media/Web 2.0 technologies to strengthen communication, collaboration and information exchange in support of the agency's mission" (TEA, 2012). TEA maintains "official social media accounts" for Flickr, iTunes U, NCLB Podcasts, Project Share, RSS feeds, and Twitter (TEA, 2012).

No geographical limitations

Public and private universities, as well as many universities throughout the United States are migrating principal and superintendent programs to an online learning environment. This affords students greater geographical choice for graduate work. No longer is the supermajority of students limited to attending a local university within a reasonable

driving distance. Students can now attend any university with an online training program without regard to its geographical location (Harris, 2012). Texas universities enroll students nationally and internationally increasing the richness of the global graduate learning experience. In a time of a dwindling revenue stream from taxes, tuition generated from national and international students add much needed dollars to Texas higher education.

Advantages for Universities

Like students, universities also reap advantages by incorporating technology within the practicum.

Flexibility

Greater flexibility exists in scheduling meetings between professor, mentor and intern. With travel time eliminated, this time can be repurposed for research, consulting, course preparation, professional responsibilities and teaching.

Larger applicant pool

Universities, whether they are located in less populated areas of the state or in major metropolitan areas, have access to a larger pool of potential students. This pool of potential students extends beyond the Texas borders.

Time Management

Time no longer needs to be budgeted for traveling to sites in most cases. Travel time can be reassigned to mentoring and other instructional obligations. Last minute schedule changes are much easier to accommodate when travel is replaced with videoconferencing.

Increased communication

Using tools such as Google+ video chat encourages professors to have as many f2f conferences as needed. The one-size-fits-all three conferences no longer limits rich oral and visual communication in the practicum. If anything, the online practicum encourages increased communication.

Technology Surpassed Policy

Rapid change along with greater access to rich, multimedia content creates opportunities as well as challenges for schools (*Technology in Education*, 2011). This appears to be the case with TAC Rule §228.35. Before today's advances in technology, students and professors were confined to physical site visits and physical conferences. This system was cumbersome, expensive and time consuming. Time and travel expenses hampered a more robust communication within the practicum, as did unexpected absences and forgotten appointments. Other factors such as inclement weather, congested urban roadways, last minute emergencies and illnesses also posed challenges. Thus typically the student, site mentor and university faculty member were relegated to the three visits defined in TAC Rule §228.35. This would no longer be the case in an online practicum.

Individual student needs could be tailored for those students needing more f2f communication in order to meet with academic success.

Technological advancements combined with the upgrading of school site technological infrastructure supports online practicum visits by offering seamless visual and auditory feeds. Student, faculty and mentor are no longer shackled with cumbersome, time consuming site visits. Using software such as Skype and Google+ video chat creates a practicum site visit with the rich visual and auditory feedback associated with the traditional f2f site visit. Participants hear and see each other, allowing them to pick up audio and visual communication clues associated with face-to-face communication. Google+ video chat also affords participants the ability to view each other's computer screens in a seamless environment.

Technology provides a feasible avenue of communication beyond the three physical site visits allocated in TAC Rule §228.35. Incorporating technology into the practicum experience provides the professor, campus mentor, and the graduate intern the option to easily schedule as many additional virtual site visits needed, schedule regular weekly or biweekly visits, schedule intensive visits for the struggling student, and even assign interns into accountability groups within the practicum. Ritter and Polnick (2008) assert that online learning communities comprised of faculty and students do facilitate cohesive networks to process content at higher levels of depth and complexity. Incorporating multi-avenue communication software effectively in the practicum takes the professor, site mentor, and graduate student to a frequency of contact and feedback not feasible in the traditional f2f practicum.

Having access to technology like Google+ video chat and Skype encourages practicum stakeholders to meet with greater frequency since such meetings are convenient and both time and cost efficient. Employing virtual conferencing takes the practicum experience to a higher level of communication and collaboration in the practicum process.

Conclusion

TCPEA encourages TEA to reconsider its position on TAC Rule §228.35 with regard to the principal and superintendent practicum experiences. Those of us in the field believe the time has come to incorporate today's technology into the principal and superintendent practicum experiences in a meaningful and purposeful way. It is the position of TCPEA that incorporating cutting edge technology will increase and enrich the communication between the intern, professor and mentor beyond the existing f2f system. Incorporating technology will increase the likelihood that residential professors will assume practicum responsibilities as part of their course loads allowing for greater integration of course theory and practicum experience.

TCPEA encourages TEA to move swiftly in considering and adopting the tenets of this paper. TCPEA is ready and willing to work collaboratively with TEA in developing procedures and policies to make the Texas online principal and superintendent practicum experiences a model for the nation.

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