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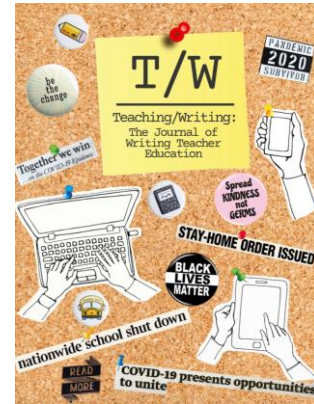
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Online Language Arts Instruction in an Elementary Methods Course: Successes and Challenges

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Beginning my second semester as an assistant professor at a small public university in the south, I thought my biggest stressor would be my three new course preparations – little did I know what the semester would bring. On March 12th faculty, staff, and students learned that face-to-face instruction would be suspended, and we had a week (our spring break) to put our courses and their accompanying practicum hours online. Teaching Language Arts in the Elementary Grades was one of my three courses that was to be put online. This 4-credit hour course with a 60-hour field experience component had 23 students (19 undergraduate and 4 graduate students). As a class we worked together through this change—change to assignments, field experiences, and receiving/delivering instruction. To help describe these changes—the successes and the challenges—Callie Martin, a masters student enrolled in the course, agreed to share her thoughts and experiences.

Very quickly, things changed. There would be no more face-to-face class sessions with students working in small groups, crafting writing pieces, giving feedback, sharing, talking, and laughing. Most students were uneasy moving forward. Callie explains, “At first, I wasn’t excited about this method of learning. I was really nervous.” As the professor, I could feel students’ apprehension, and while trying hard to hide my own, I pressed forward. I scoured websites that I trusted (www.readingrockets.com and www.readwritethink.org) for instructional videos and clips from experts. From invented spelling to the impact of art in writing, teaching into illustrations, and selecting high-quality multicultural literature as mentor texts we all forged ahead. In many ways the experience was positive, as Callie shares, “I was amazed at what could be learned by observing the teaching patterns of others. I quickly found that there are so many ways that elementary students can learn to write whilst utilizing technology! Graphic organizers and publishing to classroom blogs are just two of the many ways students can utilize technology as they learn to write. We’ve learned when to worry about misspellings, and when they should be expected and understood. Through these videos and readings, my classmates and I have been exposed to interesting and thought-provoking methods of writing instruction such as semantics gradients and new ways to teach spelling rules.” By using videos instead of relying on students’ placements, I was able to pinpoint the exact instruction I wanted them to see. We could have a shared discussion without over explaining the context, because we all saw the same thing. And while their placements are invaluable at providing them hands-on learning opportunities, those opportunities are often varied. Students are in classrooms K-5, viewing all different aspects of language arts and writing. Additionally, some of their placement teachers are excellent teachers of writing while others are not as enthusiastic about the subject area.

While the instructional component of this course remained strong, there were still challenges and disappointments. The new format was different, and it wasn't what students wanted or expected. They missed their classmates and going to practicum every day to see the elementary students they had grown to care about. A co-taught learning segment that would span 3-days was now planned via google docs and turned in as an assignment that would never be taught in person to the children for whom it was intended. Callie explains, "As I worked on the lesson plan, I found it difficult to find motivation. I was writing lesson plans that I would never get to teach. I was planning differentiation for students who were learning at home. What fun is it to plan for students who will never hear the lesson? We have also all missed opportunities to present projects that we worked hard on." It's clear that as the professor, I needed to do a better job of making these assignments more meaningful. While many of my students were able to engage in zoom meetings with their students, teaching full on lessons and learning segments that spanned 3-days were not happening.

So, what was happening in their field experiences? For Callie (and most of her classmates) they completed the remainder of their practicum hours by attending zoom class sessions. They logged on and supported their cooperating teachers in whatever capacity they could. Engaging in read alouds, answering questions, and mainly helping to supervise the chaos that ensues when you put 25 elementary students on one zoom meeting. Writing instruction during those zoom class sessions was infrequent, and Callie observed that while writing had been a vital part of her cooperating teacher's instruction prior to March 12, once the move was made to online/virtual learning "writing came to a near halt." Callie asked her teacher after a week of online learning why she didn't see the amount of writing she had before, and her cooperating teacher explained, "writing is such an individual and in-depth process that it is difficult to teach to an entire class of third graders online. Also, it is difficult to give feedback when parents are the ones helping the students. There are just so many different aspects that need to be discussed and worked on when it comes to writing, so for the time being, writing instruction has taken a backseat to reading and mathematics instruction." Other students reported similar things in their class zoom sessions. Math and reading were the main subjects focused on and writing was seen less frequently for the reasons Callie explains above, and also because of the lack of typing skills most elementary students possess.

Although the rich writing experiences students engaged in prior to March 12 were no longer occurring, writing instruction did continue in the class sessions to some degree. The instruction now consisted primarily of putting spelling words into a paragraph, participating in games related to spelling/vocabulary words, and similar activities. While the preservice teachers believed that the spelling and vocabulary activities were useful to some extent, both the preservice teachers and elementary students were missing out on participating in authentic writing instruction. It was frustrating for everyone. As the professor I wanted my students to observe and participate in a classroom where writing was happening. I wanted them to try things out, succeed and fail, and learn from both – my college students wanted these experiences as well. The cooperating teachers wanted their elementary students to continue building on the skills and concepts they had been working on all year and they felt that this was no longer possible. And finally, the elementary

students were also frustrated as Callie explains, “students are losing the interaction that goes hand in hand with the writing process. They are unable to hear peer critiques, and teacher student conferences are now non-existent. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, students are not receiving their normal level of writing instruction, and the difference shows. Each of the students have expressed a massive want to return to school during zoom meetings. One student made it clear that it is absolutely NO FUN to write something and not be able to share it with their friends.”

It is clear that in the rush to get everything online, opportunities were missed for both the elementary and college students, and I’m left wondering what I could have done better. As a professor, I needed to make sure that my students could engage in activities that would ensure the completion of their service-learning hours. I accomplished that goal, but the experiences could have been more beneficial for my college students. For example, I could have helped them record lessons that students could watch later or, even better, work with them to plan interactive zoom lessons that could be taught to all their students. At the time, it would have been tricky to orchestrate this all online, because I honestly did not know what I was doing. I quickly went from panic to must get things done mode and did not take the time to sit and think about the best way to make this process as meaningful as possible.

There were areas, however, that were stronger, and these were the areas that I felt I had more control. Such as, finding online materials and making sure that discussions were productive and assignment directions were understood. To accomplish this meant a lot of voiceovers, videos of myself explaining things, and zoom conferences with my students while my children and/or their children ran around in the background and at times, even joined in on the meetings. More than ever I had to predict what students would struggle to understand and intervene before the struggle happened (when possible). It was time consuming for me and for them, however, I learned that when in doubt do a video and a screen shot and start explaining then set up times for zoom meetings to discuss the questions that still remain. I also learned that having my college students log into their cooperating teachers’ zoom class does not equal a meaningful experience. In these instances, my directions needed to be more guided and the communication between myself and their cooperating teachers needed to be consistent – just as it had been before.

It was a hard semester for everyone, but it was also quite the accomplishment to complete it successfully. I feel that my students are now much more flexible when it comes to their outlook on writing instruction—I know that I am. And should the need arise for this type of online learning to occur again, we will all be better equipped to make the adjustments needed to ensure authentic learning occurs (both in the course and in the field) based on lessons learned from this semester.