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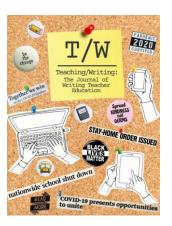
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Experiential learning in the COVID-19 Era: challenges and opportunities for ESOL teacher educators

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My journey as a teacher educator began in 2004, when the thought of on-line teaching, let alone a global health pandemic forcing us to teach on-line, was not on the horizon. As an undergraduate student, I was asked to participate in a teacher development program for English as a Second Language (ESL) educators in South America. Years later, while completing my doctorate in the U.S, I became a second language writing specialist and since then, I fell in love with the idea of helping teachers discover who they are as educators. I work at the intersection of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Writing, and my day-to-day work requires me to *both* teach writing and teach graduates and undergraduates how to teach language skills, reading and writing included, to English language learners (ELLs). Using narrative research (Riessman, 2008), in this article, I discuss how my students and I navigated the challenges of covering course content and meeting course objectives in a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) methodologies course requiring some field work in the COVID-19 era.

Context

I work for a comprehensive, regional institution located in the South. Our institution has a student population of about 8,000 students, the majority of whom are undergraduates, although we do have a strong education program that includes a Doctor of Education program (Ed.D) and a handful of M.A programs. Our students are majority non-traditional, many are working adults, with families to support and many have children. We are primarily a teaching-oriented institution serving an ethnically diverse student body. Like other regional, comprehensive institutions, we have struggled with retention and graduation, although efforts in that direction have been made in the last years ("Columbus State University Metrics").

My department, English, offers classes in literature, creative writing, professional writing, among others. Given my department's needs, the majority of my work revolves around teaching writing, but I also serve as faculty and coordinator for two short-term TESOL programs. Our programs are small but diverse given the different populations we serve: students who want to teach international students but have no teaching experience as well as those who would like to facilitate content knowledge in K-12 settings. We offer several classes, including a TESOL methodologies course, the focus of this article.

Implementing experiential learning in a TESOL methods course

My spring semester began like any other: four classes, regular service, and some research. Given my interest in experiential learning, I always create assignments that connect course content to the real-world (Kolb, 1984 & 2015). While TESOL methods is primarily intended to provide theoretical background on the teaching of language skills, I always incorporate fieldwork. In spring 2020, I required students to conduct three classroom observations at three different settings and write a reflection about each experience. Even before COVID-19, we were facing difficulties in this class: like a conspiracy against experiential learning, everything that could go wrong did. For example, out of the three placement options I gave students, all three became unavailable at different times and for different reasons. First, the coordinator for the ESOL programs at the local school district had retired in early January and the person in charge was on maternity leave. The second placement option, the university's English language institute, had seen a shift in leadership, with the interim director deciding not to grant students permission to observe classes due to what she saw as a lack of proper communication—communication that had taken place with the former director. These news came two weeks before students were supposed to submit their first observation report.

While I had encouraged students to find other placement options, only one of them had done so. At the risk of seeming self-serving, I decided that the only option we had left was for students to complete their assignments at a free English as a second language (ESL) program I had created in 2018 in conjunction with one of our local libraries. This option was not ideal; it was not even good. After all, the goal of the assignment was for students to see *experienced* ESOL teachers employ methodologies and compare them to our readings on ESL pedagogy regarding how to teach reading, writing, speaking, etc. However, it was all we had. I was embarrassed: I was teaching a methodologies course and yet unable to offer a class in which everything went as planned. I opted for honesty, while I clung to the idea of flexibility and its essential role in becoming a successful educator. Even though years of experience have showed me this is true, it sounded like an excuse. Then COVID-19 hit: schools closed, the library and my tutoring program closed, and all that was left was a computer. A wall had been built; my classes were in disarray; and I had no childcare for my then 18-month old.

Like all of my colleagues, I scrambled to re-design my courses to fit the on-line format. While I had some knowledge and comfort with technology, I had never taught a full on-line course before. Like others, my institution scrambled to share resources via emails, which sometimes took longer to read than doing independent research on a given technology. In the meantime, students in all of my classes had unplugged for spring break and remained disconnected until the day we were to resume classes. All deadlines could be moved, but I still did not know what to do about the classroom observations and tutoring reports, and students were coming to me for answers.

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I turned to the internet only to find a myriad of poor examples of ESOL teaching. Desperate for help, I decided to reach out to students. One of them had conducted an observation on-line through a program, which provides ESL tutoring for children, primarily in Asia[1]. The student agreed to put me in touch with the teacher she had observed. Eventually, we were given access to publicly available sample lessons this company uses to train tutors. While the experience was certainly not the same as attending a regular ESOL class, these were live ESL tutoring sessions addressing reading, writing, and speaking. I posted the videos, modified the assignment sheet, and gave students the option to conduct their observations on-line. While a more practical solution could have been to substitute the assignment for another; for instance, a paper or an exam, doing so would have gone against the goals of the course, against the goals for the assignment, and against my teaching philosophy, which values hands-on practice.

After reading my students' reflections, I was pleasantly surprised. I expected them to focus on the shortcomings of the new option. Instead, they had insightful comments about the experience, ranging from simple gratitude to interest in on-line tutoring as a form of supplementary income, an important consideration for our student population. They also made observations about teaching that would not have been possible in a traditional setting. For instance, they commented on the use of multimodality: how the tutors were able to present content in writing and in auditory and oral forms to help ESL learners learn. They also provided constructive criticism on the teachers' methods including the amount of praise they gave, while linking pedagogy to contextual constraints. For instance, this program allows learners to rate their tutors at the end of a session and this rating is used to determine their pay and the possibility for future sessions. On-line observations gave us opportunities to explore pedagogical issues not normally addressed in ESOL courses: do we equate writing with essay writing or can we call other activities like translation, transcribing, writing? What role does writing have as a tool to support the development of other language skills? What pedagogical practices are suitable for different media (on-line vs. in person)? Should teachers' performance be rated based on how much praise they give? What is the right balance? This last question was particularly important given the role feedback plays in writing instruction, whether in ESOL classes or stand-alone writing courses.

Implications and suggestions for teacher educators

Spring 2020 was not an easy semester. Despite the challenges, I can proudly say that I remained truthful to my teaching philosophy and did not shortchanged students. Based on my experiences, here are my takeaways for teacher educators, including those who teach writing and those who teach writing in addition to other language skills:

o   In TESOL methodology courses, a teacher educator must reassess what constitutes a teaching *context* and be more mindful of the constraints under which personnel at placement institutions operate. While I always ask students to contextualize their

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[1] The name of the company is not provided to protect their confidentiality

observations, I had never explicitly considered addressing constraints, as a form of pedagogical preparation. What constraints are there in teaching writing on-line? How do we ensure access to technology? Is it our job to do so? These are *new* questions I must grapple with as I continue to prepare a generation of future ESOL educators.

o Even if we are focusing on preparing teachers to teach a particular a skill or subject, we must remember the interconnectedness of what we teach. Namely, when teaching writing, we are not teaching it in isolation because languages are holistic systems: I cannot separate writing from reading or listening, if I am to use authentic materials. In my TESOL courses, I have encountered resistance to the introduction of authentic lesson plans and multimodality or the idea that language skills cannot be separated in real communication (Yi & Angay-Crowder, 2016). Instead, students normally come to a TESOL methods class expecting activities on each language skill that they can import into their local contexts without much modification. Experiential learning is a good way to resist this tendency because it provides opportunities for trial and error.

o Allowing student input on assignments might be a good way to reassess our curriculum because our teaching realities can inadvertently act as blind spots.

o We must be better equipped to prepare teachers for the realities of on-line instruction. This was not something I had ever addressed in my TESOL methodologies course. Not only has COVID-19 made us aware of that reality, but given the more stringent restrictions on international student visas and their trickle-down effect on international student enrollment, professionals wishing to enter the TESOL field might need to be more willing and able to go the on-line route.

o Having challenges does not mean we must abandon our course objectives. Replacing our course observations would not have captured the essence of the original assignment, even if it covered the same content.
Flexibility encompasses domains other than what we teach and how we teach it. This includes the ability to work with students, to flex deadlines, to think creatively, but especially to show students the human side of teacher preparation. About half of the students in my TESOL methods course were teachers; therefore, they occupied two spaces—sometimes without the proper infrastructure, training, or resources. Understanding how personal and emotional factors shape teacher education is important in light of teacher attrition and teacher shortage (Wiggan et al., 2020), shortage that is likely to be aggravated by a current health pandemic that has left educators at all levels of education feeling frustrated and unsupported.

To conclude, I want to stress the importance of preparing our teachers in ways that are holistic, address contextual realities, and recognize their work/life balance. All of this is particularly important for educators, but especially those preparing writing teachers; after all, writing teachers are normally overwhelmed given the amount of workload generated by student essays.

This is not to say that teaching other subjects is not challenging, but to acknowledge the unique nature of *good* writing instruction, which relies on the continuous use of feedback, which takes place outside of the classroom. Providing feedback is particularly challenging

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when issues of language proficiency are added to the mix. As somebody who sees both sides of this spectrum—a writing teacher and a writing teacher educator—I can say that these labor conditions must be acknowledged, if we are to retain teachers, especially those who work with English language learners.

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