Field Experiences in the Ether: The Pandemic-induced Realities of Learning to Teach

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Abstract

In the United States during March and April of 2020, more than 50 million K-12 students were impacted by school closures with many forced to engage in online teaching for continuity in their 2019-2020 school year. This disruption to K-12 public and private schools reverberated in programs of teacher education around the country. As school-university partners, we wanted to provide opportunities for new teacher candidates to be able to engage in some form of interaction with students and veteran teachers. We drew on the structures and strengths of our school-university partnership to build our plan to engage in pandemic-induced, alternative field experiences. In this article, we describe how one middle level school-university partnership leaned into virtual learning spaces and provided opportunities to help teacher candidates who were beginning their teacher education program conceptualize teaching and learning in new ways. Additionally, we provide classroom teachers' perspectives on hosting teacher candidates in a virtual learning format, offering insights on best practices and challenges to ponder.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted schools worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). In the United States during March and April of 2020, more than 50 million K-12 students were impacted by school closures with many forced to engage in online learning for continuity in their 2019-2020 school year (EdWeek, 2020). This disruption to K-12 public and private schools reverberated in programs of teacher education around the country. Because teacher education depends on the willingness of those schools and classroom teachers to provide spaces for teacher candidates to learn, practice, and grow into effective teachers, many programs scrambled to find alternative experiences for teacher candidates. For the University of Louisville (UL), it meant that teacher candidates would forgo any remaining field experiences at our partnership school, Midwest Middle School (MMS), for the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester and complete the usual classroom-based assignments using pre-recorded videos or other types of curricular material. For MMS, it meant teachers and students would engage in remote learning for the

remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. We knew these realities of the pandemic would not only have a lasting impact on the students of MMS but also on the knowledge and skills needed by future teachers.

As the reality set in that schools would not reopen in August of 2020 for face-to-face instruction, we knew our work of preparing middle level teachers would look very different for the 20-21 academic year. This realization set a plan in motion that would support MMS teachers in their virtual classrooms while also providing spaces for teacher candidates to work with schools and children during a global pandemic. The virtual world had changed how MMS teachers were teaching and would change how UL teacher candidates could complete field hours, classroom-based assignments, and engage with the MMS school community. We drew on the structures and strength of our school-university partnership to build our plan to engage in pandemic-induced, alternative field experiences. As school-university partners, we wanted to continue to provide opportunities for new teacher candidates to be able to engage in some form of interaction with students and veteran teachers. While not as powerful as face-to-face, we hoped virtual interactions could provide them with the context to understand and apply pedagogical concepts while also helping them grasp the multidimensional and complex work of learning to teach**.**

In this article we will describe how one middle level school-university partnership leaned into virtual learning spaces and provided opportunities to help teacher candidates who were beginning their teacher education program conceptualize teaching and learning in new ways. Additionally, we will provide classroom teachers' perspectives of hosting teacher candidates in a virtual learning format offering insights on best practices and challenges to consider.

Positionality

We are a team of middle level teacher educators who work within one school-university partnership. Penny is a university-based teacher educator at the University of Louisville (UL) who is also the Professor-in-Residence (PIR) at Midwest Middle School (MMS). Alice is a school-based teacher educator at MMS who is also the Teacher-in-Residence for UL. Laura and Caitlyn are school-based teacher educators who are classroom teachers at MMS and regular hosts of UL's teacher candidates.

Our Pre-pandemic Experiences

In a typical semester prior to the pandemic, UL middle level teacher candidates begin their undergraduate program by completing their first set of courses embedded at the UL partnership school, MMS. They engage in their teacher education coursework during the school day, within the middle school building in a designated classroom. They take part in numerous field experiences with multiple teachers and students throughout the school. As school-university partners preparing middle level teachers, we work to help the teacher candidates become members of the school community by providing a variety of opportunities beyond field experiences to participate in the daily life of the school. Our candidates engage in Professional Learning Communities, team meetings, fire drills, pep rallies, advisory classes, assemblies, and after-school, extracurricular events. We strongly encourage our teacher candidates to work explicitly to become participants in the community of MMS and not merely observers.

As the TIR, Alice regularly works with classroom teachers to ensure they are willing and able to host teacher candidates in their classrooms for the semester. She creates schedules and

communicates expectations of field experiences to teachers and teacher candidates. In a typical semester, class sessions begin with teacher candidates in the UL classroom for the first 45 minutes of class where Penny would debrief the reading and work for the day, review focus questions for the day's observation time, and engage in any instruction in preparation for the teacher candidates' time in the classrooms. Following this, teacher candidates are dismissed to their assigned classrooms throughout the school for a 50-minute observation experience. While in their assigned classrooms, teacher candidates work to complete the day's assignment or tasks while paying attention to the specific focus questions for the day. They also work with small groups, engage in co-teaching, support students one-one-one, or assist the teacher in a variety of appropriate tasks. At the end of the observation experience, teacher candidates return to the UL classroom for the last 60 minutes to debrief the experience and continue with the class session focused on the particular topic of the day's work.

Pandemic-induced Changes to Preparing Teachers

As both UL and MMS began the 20-21 academic year remotely, we agreed it was important that our new teacher candidates were still able to see how veteran teachers work--even in a global pandemic. We still wanted to offer them a variety of classes and activities to observe even though we were only able to engage within the ether. Consistent with our regular routines within our partnership, Alice began by asking if teachers were willing to host a teacher candidate in their virtual classrooms. Teaching remotely was a new experience for most of the teachers at MMS, so we kept in mind that the technology could be intimidating, and they may not feel equipped to host a teacher candidate as well. While we recognize that our MMS teachers' priority is the middle schoolers for whom they are responsible, we also know that by virtue of teaching in a school-university partnership school, MMS teachers feel a sense of responsibility to the education of new teachers. We always want them to engage with confidence and willingness, but during this unprecedented time, it was important to ensure they felt comfortable with a neophyte in their virtual classrooms.

In pre-pandemic semesters, we are typically constrained by the varying schedules of the UL class session, teacher candidates' schedules, varying grade level schedules, lunch times, and related arts classes. However, we found that the realities of fully remote learning, also called Non Traditional Instruction (NTI), created an opportunity for a schedule that was much more conducive to offering diverse opportunities for teacher candidates. Given the increased flexibility, we were able to recruit a wider variety of experienced teachers in multiple grade levels and across all content areas to host our teacher candidates in their virtual classrooms. While we usually had a high number of teachers who eagerly volunteered to host UL teacher candidates, we found that as teachers settled into the new normal of teaching remotely, more felt comfortable and even requested candidates' assistance in specific classes for increased interaction with students.

Structure and Consistency

As middle level teacher educators, it was important to us that the new teacher candidates had the opportunity to engage in virtual field experiences where they could not only see middle level instruction and assessment but also observe the foundational aspects of middle school organizational structures in practice within the virtual world. MMS is organized by teams and engages in team planning as well as content specific Professional Learning Communities. They have regular advisory classes that consist of community-building exercises and social-emotional

learning activities. MMS "Camp Days" consist of grade-level meetings among teachers and staff, project-based learning sessions, virtual clubs, and virtual support. All of these structures are important under normal circumstances. However, they became even more critical for middle level learners during remote learning for increased social interaction and cooperative learning. It was important to us that teacher candidates were able to see all of these components of a middle school, even while not in the physical building.

With all the new possibilities for engagement at MMS, coupled with the realities of shifting schedules, it was vital to maintain the expected consistency and structure for the teachers and the teacher candidates. Following the lead of MMS administration, Alice created a comprehensive schedule of options so candidates could log into regular content classrooms or observe an advisory lesson, a team meeting, a Professional Learning Community, a related arts classroom, or a virtual club. While our candidates have the options to do all of the above when in-person school is in session, so many are bound by time constraints of the UL class schedule, traveling to and from MMS, and their own programmatic schedule at the University. With remote learning, there was more flexibility in how the candidates could move into and out of classes in less time and with very little disruption. This flexibility also provided more opportunities for candidates to engage in multiple virtual classrooms observing different teachers and different styles of teaching.

Below is an example schedule Alice created for one teacher candidate (see Table 1). In this schedule, the teacher candidate would be able to participate in content specific classes on Blue Days and White Days at 8:50 and 10:50. They would also have the opportunity to observe Professional Learning Communities at 8:00 and advisory classes at 1:20. Because our candidates are all seeking certification in different content areas (i.e., English/Language arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies), their schedules might differ from one another.

Table 1

Example Schedule for Teacher Candidates

6th Grade Schedule	Blue Day	White Day	Camp Day
8:00-8:45	Professional Learning Communities	Professional Learning Communities	Floor Meeting
8:50-9:45	A Group	C Group	Camp Warkhawk
9:50-10:45	Planning	Planning *Students attend Related Arts Classes*	Camp Warkhawk: Project-Based Learning
10:50-11:45	B Group	D Group	Virtual Clubs
11:45-12:15	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch

12:20-1:15	Office Hours	Office Hours	Virtual Clubs
1:20-2:10	Advisory and Response-to-Intervention	Advisory and Response-to-Intervention	Additional Time to Meet with Students One-on-One
2:15 - 3:00	Team Planning	Team Planning	Additional Time to Meet with Students One-on-One

Contextualizing Virtual Learning

In addition to maintaining the structure and consistency of our practices of classroom observation for our teacher candidates, we knew it was also important to contextualize the *MMS students'* engagement in virtual learning. We were cognizant that new teacher candidates would be coming to the virtual classrooms with many preconceived notions of teaching and learning and of young adolescent students. As in pre-pandemic class sessions, Penny engaged in instruction addressing deficit perspectives related to young adolescent students and their families as well as young adolescent social, emotional, intellectual, physical, and identity growth and development. Woven into this instruction was also a focused discussion on possible issues of access and equity related to non-traditional, online instruction. While the school district provided laptops and hotspots for students who needed them, it was still important for us to consider the myriad possible issues that might cause disruption in the learning process during virtual classes. Teacher candidates recognized that computer/electronic device challenges or lack of internet, adult support, and learning spaces could greatly hinder a student from fully engaging. They also acknowledged that distractions in the home could pose concerns and obstacles for some students. It was essential for teacher candidates to be aware that they would see students with parents not at home to monitor online learning because they were working or students dealing with technology challenges, such as unstable wifi connections or audio and video issues. It was also critical for our teacher candidates to see how MMS teachers would handle these challenges. Additionally, Penny and Alice both set aside time each week to debrief the candidates' experiences in the virtual classrooms. These conversations allowed time for discussion about how teachers might handle the various challenges of access and equity in a virtual learning environment.

MMS Teachers' Perspectives

Classroom teachers at MMS who have hosted teacher candidates in their virtual classrooms have viewed the experience as a helpful opportunity in various capacities. Laura and Caitlyn, MMS classroom teachers and regular hosts of UL teacher candidates, found that utilizing the breakout rooms feature in online meeting platforms with teacher candidates was the most helpful aspect in the virtual classroom. This feature allowed them the chance to conference with individual students while others were in a collaborative room working on an assignment with a teacher candidate. It also allowed the teacher candidate the opportunity to play a role in the classroom as they monitored conversations to ensure MMS students were on task, but more importantly, to answer questions or clear misconceptions as students collaborated. The host

teachers also intentionally placed teacher candidates with groups of middle school students that might have been less engaged or ones that required a bit more guidance to ensure they were staying focused and involved in the lesson. Having a teacher candidate in the virtual classroom gave the teacher the freedom to move between virtual groups with ease and limited distraction. While not the same, this work somewhat mirrored experiences of face-to-face instruction and was helpful to new teacher candidates as they learned how to interact, question, and engage in small group instruction, and attempt to build relationships with middle school students.

For some classroom teachers, hosting a teacher candidate in the traditional classroom can be intimidating or overwhelming. However, in the virtual world this seemed to be less so. While MMS teachers recognized that the flexibility and decreased distraction of a teacher candidate being in the classroom virtually was a good thing, they acknowledged that it came at a cost. For example, within the online class meetings, it was easy for the teacher candidate to blend in with the rest of the class as a virtual student. This did provide the teacher candidate with an accurate and genuine view of the virtual classroom, but unfortunately the MMS students were less connected with the UL teacher candidates. Because it was so easy for the UL teacher candidates to enter the virtual class undetected or with little disruption, they became somewhat indistinguishable from the middle school students on the virtual screen. This greatly impacted their ability to naturally interact as they might in face-to-face field experience which limited their ability to get to know students or build the relationships they might have if they were physically present in the classroom.

Challenges of Virtual Field Experiences

Offering alternative field experiences during a global pandemic in and of itself is challenging. However, we strongly believe one of the biggest challenges in this work as virtual teacher educators was the inability to capitalize on the teachable moments with teacher candidates. We believe it happened for two reasons. First, teachable moments within the virtual setting were limited in number simply by virtue of not being able to replicate the nuances of behavior, interactions, actions, and language that come with the physically present act of teaching middle school students. When these moments occur in face-to-face experiences, teachers and teacher candidates have brief moments to chat during the lesson when students are working or between classes. These conversations are important as MMS teachers have the chance to discuss instructional choices, seating arrangement, classroom space, and management techniques that help the classroom run smoothly.

Second, the ability to move in and out of the virtual world, coupled with the rapid succession of online meetings that occurred throughout the day, teachers were often unable to debrief lessons and reveal their pedagogical choices or the rationale for an activity after the lesson is over. Oftentimes, teachers were being pulled into another meeting or teacher candidates were rushing off into their own virtual world eliminating the opportunity to fully debrief the pacing of the lesson, the scaffolding that was in place, or discuss the important information about students' specific needs. This also limited opportunities for candidates to observe how teachers engage in virtual support of struggling students and parents, especially those students who were unable to participate because of technology challenges. While MMS teachers implemented numerous supports for students and families (e.g., handwritten notes home, phone calls home, regular text updates, virtual parent nights, mailing hard-copy assignments, virtual celebrations, creating school-appropriate social media accounts), many times teacher candidates did not see

the behind-the-scenes work of these efforts. If virtual field experiences continue, we hope to create structures that will have teacher candidates involved with these efforts in some way.

A second significant challenge for virtual field experiences for teacher candidates was issues related to technology. Teacher candidates needed to have a reliable internet connection, a working microphone, and video capability. When lack of bandwidth limited the ability to be in the classroom via video, teacher candidates tended to blend in, making engagement in discussions or chat conversations difficult and awkward. It also made it much easier for teacher candidates to disengage in the class activities. An additional layer to these challenges is the heightened security measures of online meeting platforms that require teacher candidates to be individually admitted to the virtual classroom.

Lessons Learned

All of us have learned many things during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the lessons will serve us outside of the classroom in the future, and many will help us (re)view teaching and learning and the process of learning to teach within the ether. First, hosting teacher candidates under normal circumstances requires clear, ongoing, and consistent communication. Hosting teacher candidates during a global pandemic makes communication the critical lifeline to learning to teach. It has always been important for a host teacher to provide the expectations of teacher candidate's work in the classroom and opportunities to stretch their wings as a developing teacher. Within the virtual classroom clear and specific expectations about engagement should be even more detailed for teacher candidates depending on their developmental level. Given that our teacher candidates were in their first semester, we could have considered more specific expectations for the teachers and candidates. For example, should they have their video on at all times? Should they engage in the conversations or instruction when directed by the teacher? What, if any, role should they have in the virtual lesson? Specific directions could have helped teachers know what to expect from teacher candidates and help teacher candidates feel more involved and engaged in the virtual classroom. Additionally, it continued to be important to the development of neophytes to be encouraged to step into the ether and outside of their comfort zone behind the screen and engage in breakout rooms for small group instruction and interaction with students.

Second, because many aspects of physically present management of the classroom are not major issues in virtual learning, there is potential to have a greater emphasis on the instructional choices and best practices of teaching and learning that might otherwise be overshadowed by other issues. A deeper focus on these aspects during virtual learning has the potential to contribute to a teacher candidate's self-confidence once they return to face-to-face teaching.

Finally, navigating the technology needs took logistical creativity and stamina. Our school district has its own domain for teachers and students, and any individual outside of the domain cannot freely enter the virtual classrooms. We learned early on to establish a logistical protocol that included a process of admitting candidates efficiently and with the least amount of distraction possible. Some teachers created secure, static links to their classrooms and others navigated this complication by utilizing email correspondence between themselves and the teacher candidate.

UL Perspective

Having our teacher candidates learn about teaching and learning through observing and participating in online classrooms is not ideal pedagogy. However, in light of our circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic, our work as teacher educators remained focused on the intentional instruction in learning to teach. We recognized that teaching and learning online has different components and aspects that are specific to the practice. However, learning to teach from observing online teaching brought an entirely new layer of complexity to the work. It was important for us to maintain consistent practices in the pedagogy of teacher education as we created spaces in the virtual world for our candidates to learn from teachers and students in real-time. Even though they were in virtual classrooms, we wanted them to be able to notice the various aspects of effective teaching. We developed focus questions so teacher candidates could still engage in the practice of targeted observation of classrooms and students. We debriefed those questions each week to allow candidates opportunities to make explicit theory to practice connections. We ensured that the coursework highlighted the principles of instructional design so teacher candidates would have the schema to notice how lessons were structured paying special attention to the pacing, transitions, formative assessment, and student engagement. We also asked teacher candidates to take note of the ways teachers were teaching and interacting with their students as they worked to provide a variety of learning possibilities in a remote scenario. Teacher candidates were also directed to pay close attention to issues of agency, responsibility, flexibility, and choice within the virtual middle school classrooms. While we do not have data from our teacher candidates about the aforementioned goals of our work, we believe the alternative field experiences broadened their perspectives of teaching and learning in middle school classrooms.

Conclusion

As a team of school and university-based teacher educators, we feel it was beneficial to have teacher candidates in the virtual classrooms who were able to provide feedback to students on tasks, monitor small groups in breakout rooms, and facilitate live-scoring assessments for on-demand writing activities. We also believe teacher candidates were able to focus on instructional choices and the effective implementation of technology tools that promote student learning. It is still not clear when UL teacher candidates will be able to enter the classroom for face-to-face field experiences again. However, we remain hopeful that a foundation of flexibility, optimism, and grit fostered through our alternative field experiences with MMS will expand their understanding of teaching and learning in the middle grades and offer a conceptual framework of effective middle level practices.

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