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Moving to a Virtual Literacy Practicum: Challenges and Solutions

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Moving to a Virtual Literacy Practicum: Challenges, and Solutions

On March 10, 2020, with the threat of COVID-19, my university sent an email asking what professors would do if they had to teach remotely. I responded with general ideas for each of my courses. The next day, the World Health Organization announced there was a global pandemic (WHO, 2019), which would eventually impact 1.6 billion learners around the world [United Nations Policy Briefing (UNPB), 2020]. Right away, an e-mail message arrived from my university with the message, “We start teaching remotely tomorrow.”

The shock made my colleagues and me spring into action. Due to the university mandate to transition to an online format in the middle of the spring term, I had to make changes to my courses. My spring practicum focused on adolescent literacy with in-person tutoring at a high school, could not meet in person. The adjustment to the course was to ask teacher candidates to create lesson plans, but they were no longer required to teach them to students they had been tutoring. This abrupt ending of tutoring left both the tutors and the high school students without a sense of closure and minus valuable teaching and learning experiences.

The university canceled all events on campus on March 12, 2020. There were 4,000+ face-to-face courses at my university to be delivered via Zoom (News @ FIU, 2020). I had experience joining Zoom meetings. However, I had to learn how to initiate my Zoom sessions and the pedagogy needed to teach courses via Zoom. The shift to virtual teaching would involve my challenge to learn new delivery tools, understand online pedagogy, engage my candidates, and understand the problems they faced as well.

At the time of the abrupt change, social distancing became the new reality. Then, on May 22, 2020, the university announced working remotely would continue through July 6th,

Moving to a Virtual Literacy Practicum

meaning all summer courses would also be offered remotely. I was scheduled to teach another practicum, but because all K-12 schools were canceled by order of the Governor for the rest of the school year, the chance there would be a summer practicum for Diagnosis and Remediation courses on-site at an elementary school, was highly unlikely. Yet, there were the Master of Science in Reading /Literacy Education program candidates who needed these courses to graduate. I had to begin to plan how I could design such online courses. In this article, I will share the problems I encountered, the solutions I devised to accomplish this goal, and the changes in the use of technology for teaching and learning.

Research on Teaching Online Practicums

My first thought was to find out whether others had taught a practicum online. I immediately researched what I could learn from the literature. I found a few articles about online clinics (Fry, 2008; Lilienthal, 2014; Lilienthal, Pottho, & Anderson, 2017; Vokatis, 2018) suggesting ideas as to how to proceed. Some of my questions were: 1) Is there a particular platform I should use? 2) What assessment and instructional practices would the candidates be able to use? 3) How should I evaluate candidates' instruction? The situations for these documented online clinics were different, but the questions they raised were like mine. These articles discussed various technology platforms. My decision was an easy solution for me because I had already been using Zoom, a platform my university supported. I had to invest time watching webinars to learn how to maximize the capability of Zoom. I also consulted colleagues to learn from them what their strategies and experiences were and to share what I was learning, something many other educators did (Petroff & Bush, 2021). There were opportunities such as with faculty support articles, training videos, and instructor guides to learn how to use the systems to their fullest benefit. The articles suggested candidates use multiple instruments to

Moving to a Virtual Literacy Practicum

assess and lesson plans as well as videos to instruct. Evaluation could be conducted through the management resources using the syllabus, scanned assignments and rubrics, discussion boards, and grade books via the platform. To evaluate planning and instruction, journals could be posted online each day, breakout rooms or recordings could be used for observations, or recordings could be made and then shared with YouTube or VoiceThread (voicethread.com). Rubrics could be used for all assignments. Many other questions arose as I planned the courses.

Who should be tutored?

One of the important considerations was who and how to recruit elementary students to be tutored. I had worked with an elementary school's principal and reading coach the year before with their struggling first-and second-graders, so I reached out to them. They were delighted I wanted to set up the tutoring with their students. They even volunteered to solicit the students. I considered how to write, distribute, and receive letters of consent. I learned from the reading coach at the school not only did I have to not identify the names of the school and the principal, but also, I had to send the letters to the parents from my computer to avoid the appearance the principal was endorsing the free tutoring without going through the legal department in the public school district. I wrote a letter in English and then realized I needed to translate it into Spanish as well because we would be instructing emergent bilingual students. The consent letters had to be in English and Spanish because many of the students' parents did not speak English. After watching a webinar on youtube.com (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxNwTzecc7Y>), I learned I could submit my English letter in Word to have it translated into Spanish. I was not confident the translations were accurate. Both the reading coach and one of my doctoral students checked it and made minor corrections. I learned the translation from Word was almost good enough to send. I recommend someone

who is a speaker of the language check the document to be sure it says what you intend. Luckily, many of the candidates are fluent English/ Spanish speakers so they could converse with the parents in either language.

What Course Design Changes Need to be Made?

According to Konig (2020), teachers did not know how to teach online because they had not been taught to do so. Most of the candidates had started teaching online in March, using different platforms, attending classes on Zoom, and learning through the school system's and university's technical support departments. Creating a practicum involves knowledge of course design, the use of special strategies for instruction, and activities to support student engagement (Abernathy & Thornburg, 2020). For these reasons, besides determining the age of the students who would participate, I also decided in consultation with the reading coach at the school, to cut the tutoring sessions from two hours, as we had taught for years when we could be face-to-face, to an hour and a half, still a long time to engage students in remote learning. During the tutoring, the candidates gave Brain Breaks to the students, a time when they could stop working for a few minutes to do jumping jacks or stretch or hop on one foot, for instance, before getting back to work. I decided the candidates would meet with me from 9-10 a.m., then tutor on their Zoom meetings from 10-11:30, break for lunch until noon, and then start class with me again until 2:00 p.m. I had their meeting IDs and passwords so I could join their sessions to observe their teaching. We used passwords to add security to our sessions so outsiders could not come into the sessions.

Whereas previously, teachers kept a notebook for their plans each day, now they had to upload the day's plan to Canvas, the learning management system (LMS). Canvas would serve

Moving to a Virtual Literacy Practicum

as a shell for the courses. In the past, I had asked candidates to set up a plastic box as a toolkit with all the assessments to ensure they had prepared the materials for assessment. When the practicum was online, I allowed them to use the office supplies they had on hand to hold their assessments because some of the candidates could not purchase file boxes for organizing the materials or could not get to the store to get them. I decide to ask them to upload a picture of their prepared protocols whether in a file box or some other container. This worked just as well.

The candidates prepared detailed timeframes for every 10 minutes. They needed to have many activities planned to keep the students engaged. They were not only educators, but they also became IT support (Kirby, 2021), giving students directions about how to participate online. When candidates needed to work in small groups, they were able to use the breakout rooms on Zoom. They could meet on Zoom after sharing a web address for one of the candidates. Each candidate was able to instruct a small group of students in addition to his or her tutee. Some of the other technology applications used include Flipgrid (<https://flipgrid.com>), where the students could record themselves, Google Docs, (<https://docs.google.com>) where candidates provided their personal information and Zoom addresses for the tutoring. Some of the candidates created a Bitmoji (<https://bitmoji.com>), a personal cartoon avatar with an Emoji character, to personalize welcome signs and to add to background scenes from Canva (<https://canva.com>).

What Changes Need to be Made to Course Content?

The curriculum in remote learning needs to include the standards for the courses, just as it does in face-to-face courses, to ensure quality. This meant I had to look carefully at the number of assessments candidates would need to learn and apply. I considered the level of stress on the candidates' emotions during the pandemic. Some of them had family members they were caring

Moving to a Virtual Literacy Practicum

for; some of them had their children home with them due to school, daycare, or camp closings; and some have financial problems weighing heavily upon them due to the closing of some businesses. I selected six assessments to allow the candidates to interview parents, determine students' interests, examine attitudes, collect students' perception of the reading process, determine their level of phonics skills, pinpoint reading abilities, and confirm the reading levels by evaluating their spelling.

Additionally, I had always included the experience of Mentoring Authors, an activity for candidates and students to each create a book (Fine, 2017). This had been a fun part of the intervention as the candidates taught research skills using technology, writing skills, and concepts about text structure. I wanted to include this experience because once children are authors themselves, they have a new appreciation for books and see authors as real people who communicate with audiences. The physical, hands-on experience was not going to be part of the remote learning practicum. However, bookmaking could still be integrated via either bookmaker.com or storyjumper.com, two programs with easy-to-learn tutorials provided on their websites. Instead of both the candidates and the students making their books, the candidates would support their students to create an information book on a topic they both agreed to study. These book-making programs have lots of options for text colors, so the idea of integrating text structure concepts was still possible. The students could demonstrate when they were giving definitions, showing descriptions, sequences, cause and effects, comparisons and contrasts, or problems and solutions as well as text features of expository text by changing the colors of the text and identifying them with a legend (Blachowicz, 2013).

Other assignments included writing journals each day, creating lesson plans to address the student's areas for growth, assigning books from online resources such as getepic.com or

Moving to a Virtual Literacy Practicum

myon.com for the students to read at home. When teaching face-to-face, candidates would build a literacy niche filled with books with a science board on their desks for displaying student work. With the online version, PowerPoint (an application in Office, 2016) became the literacy niche for the students' online environment. They captured the names of books students wanted to read and copies of their writing. Each day, students wrote on bookmarks about what they had read. The bookmarks and other student-created products, such as an "I Can Chart" where the students listed their new accomplishments, were posted on personalized PowerPoints. They also kept a fluency chart for adding the number of words correctly read each day. Using PowerPoint worked well because as they added these slides to the presentation, it allowed students to see their growth through their work products during the practicum.

I was able to go into the zoom sessions to observe the candidates teaching lessons. My observations allowed me to observe the candidates teaching using concept development steps, "I do, we do, you do." I was able to see some of the children who were sitting up at a desk and could be seen on screen while others were on their beds and not paying close attention. We then shared rules for participation on Zoom with students and their parents. I asked the students to mute themselves unless they were speaking with their tutor. I sent some suggestions to parents via their emails about the importance of their child having a quiet environment so he or she could concentrate on the lesson. I suggested students sit at a chair with their computer on a desk or table. Despite these directions, some tutors had to constantly remind the children to sit up so they could be seen on their webcams.

What Was Learned that Could Be Applied for Other Courses?

My next challenge was creating a practicum based on adolescent literacy for spring, 2021. This second practicum was easier to design based on answering so many questions from the summer online practicum experience and the fall teaching experience. When this practicum had been face-to-face, each candidate would tutor a small group of students at a high school. However, the regular public schools would not allow the candidates on-site to tutor due to COVID-19 restrictions. I needed to work with a charter school that would allow tutoring via Zoom. This connection was made by one of my teacher candidates. With the online format, each candidate worked with one student from the school for only one hour since the students had been online during the day. The candidates needed to assess and instruct based on the assessment data results to demonstrate the course competencies. I asked the candidates to teach one student from the school via Zoom and one other outside student. This increased tutoring time and widened the impact of the service-learning nature of the practicum. Service-learning integrates community engagement with academic courses (Walker & Katz, 2020). The candidates were able to develop two case studies to demonstrate their impact on K-12 learners' reading achievement improvement.

By spring 2021, candidates were more fatigued from teaching virtually and, in some cases, simultaneously in-person, all day. As a consideration, I gave them extra time when needed to complete work. Building relationships with this type of appreciation for their circumstances between the professor and the candidates and adjusting the tutoring days and times between the candidates and the students is critical (Abernathy & Thornburg, 2021). We are all learning how to use the new technology and what it entails. I found my candidates could make suggestions to me and each other about various aspects of the technological applications.

Each term, we learned more and more. I had to reflect upon the successful experiences of all my teacher candidates and share them in this article.

While these courses were successful, the global ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic suggest many students may have suffered significantly due to failure to log on, or to complete assignments, or to inequality of access to online classes (Middleton, 2020). Solutions to these problems will take time and much collaboration. It is a challenge for educators and policymakers to address.

Education has evolved and will continue to evolve as society and technology change. This has been the case in the history of literacy education, although it has been at warp speed since COVID-19 came on the scene. No doubt, it will continue to evolve with new dynamics incorporating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) that will impact our conception and vision of teaching and learning as we go forward from this dramatic period of change.

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Moving to a Virtual Literacy Practicum

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