

Supervising Middle Level Student Teachers in an Online Environment: Challenges and
Opportunities

Laurie A. Ramirez, Associate Professor
Appalachian State University
ramirezla@appstate.edu

Linda C. Pacifici, Associate Professor
Appalachian State University
pacificilc@appstate.edu

Kimberly W. Money, Instructor
Appalachian State University
moneykd@appstate.edu

Abstract

This article provides insight into the teaching of an on-line student teaching experience for graduate students at a North Lindaina public university. The authors each taught and supervised in this course for the first time, collaborating regularly to navigate their new roles in a program that is somewhat unique. This manuscript focuses on the challenges they faced over a semester as well as the opportunities this learning experience provided. Each offers a vignette of a student, highlighting the differences among students and the difficulties inherent in this particular student teaching model. The authors conclude with some recommendations and lessons learned from this unique collaborative experience.

Introduction

Traditionally, student teaching for undergraduate teacher education majors spans 15 to 16 weeks and preservice teachers complete their field experience in a classroom setting with a mentor teacher. University supervisors visit each preservice teacher periodically throughout the semester, providing support and feedback in person and meeting when needed with the mentor teacher.

In this article, the instructors present an alternate student teaching model and an analysis of it after having experienced it as both instructors and supervisors. This student teaching model enables students who have already completed an undergraduate degree to pursue an initial teaching license in middle or secondary education, with the option of a concentration in CTE (Career and Technical Education). This new program, different from a typical graduate program, offers students a graduate certificate in as little as only 18 hours. In order to maximize student enrollment for this new program, it was designed to be offered completely online, asynchronously. This online structure presented both opportunities and challenges for the students and the instructors. In its infancy, the program was small and led mainly by the designer and program director. Over time, it has grown and has required some restructuring and additional instructors/supervisors.

Students enrolled in the Graduate Teaching Certificate program must accomplish a number of program completion assignments in order to complete the program and become eligible for state teacher licensure. The major assignment is to earn a passing score on the state-wide teacher performance assessment edTPA (for more information on this assessment, see <https://www.edtpa.com/>). Students create lesson plans, teach, and assess student learning, writing three commentaries documented with videos of their teaching. External evaluators score each

edTPA submission. Additionally, the students must achieve the level of “proficient” on the Certificate of Teaching Capacity, a document composed of 18 teaching competencies. These competencies are assessed mid-way through the teaching internship and again at the end by each students’ mentor teacher. Another test of teacher preparation, Praxis II, is required in order to receive the certificate; however, a passing score is not a requirement for graduation. One to three observations of each student through Zoom, taped videos, or in person must indicate that each student possesses the skills, dispositions, and knowledge to successfully teach in the classroom.

Kimberly, a former elementary and secondary teacher and principal, has been working as a university instructor for one year. She has had previous experience with supporting student teachers throughout the years as an assistant principal and principal in K-12 public schools. Laurie, a former middle school teacher, has been working at the university level for over a decade. She has had previous experience supervising student teachers at a previous university, but only recently has begun to teach courses online and supervising student teachers at her current institution. Linda, a former elementary school teacher, has worked as a professor in the college of education for over twenty years, supervising undergraduate elementary education students. She teaches elementary education curriculum methods courses, including online courses. The online graduate certificate internship/practicum course was a new experience for each of the instructors. As such, the three worked closely together to navigate their new responsibilities, meeting weekly, communicating regularly, and relying on each other for support.

The purpose of this reflective study was to analyze and critique the use of an online format for a course that has traditionally relied on face-to-face interaction. The authors hoped to

articulate the challenges and lessons learned in order to provide others with insights about best practices in supporting students in this type of format, as more universities move courses online.

Methods

The methods for this reflective study were qualitative in nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Specifically, the authors utilized the grounded theory method of data collection and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Data sources included notes from weekly meetings over a period of seven months, all email communication among the three instructors as well as between the instructors and the university graduate school, office of field experiences, the program director, and the department chair. Further, data includes all email communication between each supervisor and her students, the mentor teachers, and principals. Additionally, formal required licensure assessments and teaching videos further inform the work in this study. The authors met to review the data, not from the perspective of course instructors, but rather as researchers, examining common themes and results.

Grounded theory data analysis uses a constant comparative approach, where participants have all experienced the process and develop theory to explain practice (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this study, the participants include both the university supervisors and their selected students, all of whom experienced this unique online student teaching format collectively. The study focuses on the shared experiences of the three university supervisors, all of whom were teaching the course for the first time in a format that was wholly unfamiliar. Uniquely positioned as both the course instructors and the university supervisors, they met weekly, where they engaged in a reflective collective analysis of all data sources, utilizing the strategy of critical friendship in order to develop credibility, confirmability, and trustworthiness in their work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Vignettes

We offer vignettes of three students who had distinct experiences in this course. Each was chosen based on their completion of course and program requirements. Linda chose a student, Susan, who was successful in passing the edTPA but who could not meet the proficiency standard for the professional dispositional assessment. Kimberly chose a student, Jay, who missed the edTPA cut off score by only one point but successfully passed after resubmitting. He, in comparison, achieved scores of proficient on all areas of his professional dispositional assessment. Laurie chose a student, Mike, who was successful on both course and program requirements with very little difficulty or need for assistance.

Student #1.

Susan, the lowest achieving of the students selected to be highlighted in this study, was not evaluated as the lowest due to not passing the capstone assessment, edTPA, but due to not scoring at the proficient level for the professional dispositions document. Susan was assigned to a middle grades math classroom for her internship. She did not attend the opening Zoom sessions and never appeared to communicate the nature of the online student teaching/graduate certificate model to her teacher. Whenever asked why she was not present at the weekly Zoom session, Susan claimed her school did not have the computer bandwidth necessary for her to log into Zoom. Linda was frustrated that attempts to talk with Susan or her teacher never materialized until towards the deadline date for edTPA submission. In emails Linda received separately from both Susan and her mentor teacher, it was evident that things had not gone well between them. The mentor teacher did not understand the program model and was not shown the emails or PowerPoint information materials Linda sent out to the student teachers. Susan's expectations for herself did not align with those of her mentor teacher nor Linda as the university instructor.

Susan used her own public school experience as a student to frame her construct of teaching and used this reference continually. Her teacher was also frustrated, not understanding why Linda was not coming out to see Susan and talk with her, the mentor teacher. Finally, Linda was able to see Susan teaching and it was apparent Susan was strong in her content knowledge but severely lacked the awareness and knowledge of basic teaching skills such as classroom management and lesson plan pacing. The mentor teacher could not assess Susan at the proficient level for each competency in the Certificate of Teaching Capacity. While Susan was able to independently figure out how to complete and pass the edTPA, she did not pass the course and is currently in remediation. Communication was the concept emerging from this vignette with classroom teachers understanding a different program model for the student teaching component of the teacher preparation program. Susan did not have, at the time, the attitude and dispositions needed by teacher candidates. She assumed she did not need our help, instruction, or feedback and could do it independently.

Student #2.

The middle achieving student, Jay, is a student teacher who demonstrated areas of proficiency according to observation data, and areas that needed improvement. Jay did not pass the capstone assessment, edTPA, initially; rather, he missed the cut score by one point. After completing a resubmission, he then passed the assessment. The Certificate of Teaching Capacity form, completed by his mentor teacher, showed proficient in most areas at the mid-term mark and then in all areas by the final. Informal data from the mentor teacher, including email correspondence, did not provide significant feedback or detail that would indicate Jay possessed any struggles at that time.

Jay demonstrated a positive teacher presence and disposition in the classroom. He quickly connected with his students in order to establish strong relationships, as noted by his mentor teacher. As with many new teachers, Jay struggled with classroom management skills, as noted in his mid-term and final teaching observations, completed by his university instructor. Factors that contributed to his struggle with classroom management included his rate of speech and lack of articulation. He also did not provide sufficient wait time for students to meet his expectations before moving forward with teaching his lesson. These factors contributed to clarity issues in presentation. As noted in Jay's observation data, he also struggled with monitoring during instruction once he released students to complete an independent activity, which often had implications for classroom management.

Although the aforementioned struggles are somewhat common for beginning teachers, the data Kimberly received from the mentor teacher indicated she had no concerns pedagogically or dispositionally with Jay at any point. There was a clear discrepancy in the data between the observational data, completed by the university instructor, and the Certificate of Teaching Capacity form, completed by the mentor teacher. Perhaps, additional communication between the university instructor and mentor teacher could have prevented the discrepancy in data.

Student #3.

In conversations with Kimberly and Linda, Laurie began to reflect on one particularly high achieving student. Mike stood out as the one who was not only successful on all assessments, but who was also proactive and able to work independently with very little assistance from Laurie or his mentor teacher. He completed his field experience in a middle level English/Language Arts classroom. He and his mentor teacher quickly developed a strong working relationship, which was evident in the videotaped lessons; she was present, helping out

if needed, monitoring students, and offering feedback if requested. While they worked well together, his teacher clearly stated that he “takes initiative and completes tasks without being asked” (Certificate of Teaching Capacity, 3/19/19). Further, she spoke warmly about how he quickly took on the responsibility for teaching, creating engaging lessons for students, asking thoughtful questions, and encouraging critical thinking.

Mike, unlike many of his early career peers, was a natural with classroom management. In videos of his teaching, he has an easy manner and a good rapport with students. He moves about the room, talking with students, monitoring their work, and sometimes laughing at a comment. He is quick to answer questions and assist students who need help. Mike’s overall demeanor is one of a seasoned teacher, one who feels confident and competent in his content knowledge and pedagogical skills. For Laurie, Mike was clearly an outstanding student teacher, the one who proactively emailed with questions about upcoming deadlines or requirements, rarely needed assistance or even clarification, was organized, had strong time management skills, and was ultimately highly successful in all areas. He clearly demonstrated not only the skills of a more experienced teacher, but also the dispositions of someone naturally suitable to the profession.

Results

Challenges

Analysis of the different evaluation tools, email communications, and notes from the weekly instructor meetings reveal structural insights, at two levels. Since none of the instructors had taught the course before this semester, and since there was no training or mentoring available for them, the lack of updated tools and information presented issues for students, such as incorrect, missing, or ill-timed information. At the administrative level, the instructors

discovered that updated information was either not available or incorrect, or, in some cases, competing administrative offices perpetuated the inconsistent or incorrect information presented to all involved. The instructors often found themselves caught in the middle of decisions that were time sensitive for the students as questions made their way through the levels of administrative offices. In one instance, an instructor found her credibility being questioned by a high-level administrator in which her immediate supervisor needed to intervene. Thus, navigating the power dynamics was a learning process for the instructors.

At a second level, the impact for students, the course website sent to the instructors was not student-friendly and needed a complete overhaul. This revision process required the instructors to learn new technology skills, to learn the course timeline in order to anticipate upcoming steps, and to categorize and label needed documents for students in a user-friendly manner. The nature of the course required that the instructors work in two roles: as course instructors and as university supervisors for the same students in their placement schools. Data results indicate that the student teachers and their mentor teachers had no previous experience with this online teaching certificate model. Some of the mentor teachers made incorrect assumptions about the student and supervisor expectations, thinking the program was deficient in communication and teaching observations. At the end of the semester, the importance of that communication was highlighted when the instructors realized that the students were required to score proficient on all areas of the Certificate of Teaching Capacity form. Keeping track of graduation requirements for the university's graduate school, as well as learning all the state and college requirements with the due dates for the students, created a vulnerable situation for everyone involved with the course. The instructors found themselves having to apologize to principals, mentor teachers, and students. The continuing breakdown of information puts the

instructors in a precarious position as the last to know of changes yet the front line with the students, mentor teachers, and principals.

Opportunities

As a result of working together through teaching this course, collegiality grew among the team of three instructors. The instructors grew in the knowledge of learning course content, and their relationships grew, professionally and personally, as they shared ideas and the overall responsibility of teaching this new course. Having like-minded colleagues with whom to work greatly enhanced this overall experience as the instructors were encouraged to share ideas in a safe space. The work was strengthened by the freedom to question and critique one another, trusting that the information would be well-received and would serve to improve the overall experience for students. This safe space and freedom to share with one another is a feature not typically found in higher education circles, but undeniably fostered a very productive working environment.

Another opportunity that developed out of the work together was a focus on cooperation and collaboration without competition. All three instructors realized that they needed each other's expertise in order for all to be successful, and ultimately for students to achieve success in the course. Kimberly, for example, had experience evaluating new teachers as a principal. Linda had decades of experience in higher education. Laurie had experience with both. With all coming to this new experience at various stages of their careers and with differing past skill sets, it became an exceptional opportunity for growth. The distinct feeling of openness, trust, and togetherness strengthened the team, making planning sessions both constructive and energizing.

Overall, this experience provided all three instructors with significant professional development in the areas of learning a new course, learning an online format, learning new

policies and procedures related to the course, and learning new assessment requirements, including related documents and processes. The support and encouragement of each other in this collective effort was impactful, in that they began to embark upon other professional development opportunities that would help them not only better navigate this endeavor, but others in the future.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Reflecting back on this unique experience, these instructors provide some broad recommendations for others who might be engaging with fully online student teaching supervision. First, university instructors should consider including mentor teachers on all weekly correspondence and reminders sent to students in order to enhance overall understanding of course requirements and deadlines. Further, it would be helpful to create a set of resources for mentor teachers outlining the expectations for them and their student teacher, providing important information about the multiple assessments required, and answering questions that typically arise about the format and structure of this, or any model. The flow of communication, from the administration to the instructors to students and teachers in the field, needs to be strengthened so that information is timely, accurate, and clear. Finally, with the technological tools available, it would be advisable to have virtual meetings with students and their mentor teachers regularly to check in, answer questions, and have conversations in real-time, rather than relying solely on email communication.

Overall, this experience was beneficial in helping the three instructors/supervisors rethink and retool student teaching in an age of online education. All three recognized the opportunities this provided, despite the challenges they faced. Moving forward, the waters are less murky, the relationships among instructors stronger, and there is anticipation of continued growth and

improvement, resulting in a more effective program overall for students and the schools with whom they work. This work was intended to facilitate the learning process for others who may find themselves in similar situations, teaching courses online that have historically required face-to-face interaction. As times change in higher education and professional certification, all who work in the roles of instructors and supervisors need to learn to change with those times. This experience, while difficult, was also an incontrovertible opportunity.

References

- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- edTPA (2019). <https://www.edtpa.com/>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*, (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.