

## **Building Community in a Pre-Service Teacher Cohort During a Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 impacted not only how students in our public and private schools were taught, but also how the professors prepared preservice teachers to become future teachers. Striving to build a community of practice among a new cohort of M.A.Ed-Elementary Education preservice teachers, faculty worked collectively to transition from face to face to virtual instruction, selected materials that encouraged hands-on learning, adapted assignments to allow for the building of community among our students, and built positive relationships with students to allow for open lines of communication. Though we felt like we were building the bridge while crossing it, the ultimate goal was to form a cohort of preservice teachers that supported one another as a community during the transition to an online learning environment while managing the challenges of both the in-person and hybrid field placements.

*Keywords:* cohort, pandemic, remote learning

The formation of “communities of practice” and “learning communities” are a relatively new way of thinking about how students share knowledge and experiences while earning both undergraduate and advanced degrees (Trust et al., 2017; Wenger, 2018). One example of this design is what is called the cohort model often found in the field of teacher preparation. A cohort for this purpose is loosely defined as “a group of about 10 to 25 students who begin a program of study together, proceed through together, and end at approximately the same time” (Maher, 2005, p. 195). This type of design was initially popular in the field of law and medicine, but it is now commonly found throughout higher education including teacher education programs.

Benefits of a cohort model for teacher preparation include the bonds that are made between the

students, a sense of affiliation to the group, shared experiences, and the structured format that establishes a clear pattern of courses to be taken.

The professors in the program were aware that building a community of practice (Wenger, 2018) in an online setting for a cohort of students would require ensuring students were engaging with one another both during the synchronous meetings and asynchronous assignments. Research into engagement in online classes is not a new topic but one that has received an increased interest due to the influx of online degrees, remote learning, and in light of the current pandemic. Respondents to a national survey on online education indicated that students often perceive that online courses typically include a lack of connection with other classmates and the instructor, issues with motivation and remaining focused, and an instructor that was unavailable or inconsistent with communication (Aslanian & Clinefleter, 2012). The professors knew that if the online program was going to be successful in addressing these issues, the classes and coursework would need to be designed to include many of the same strategies used for creating an in-person community of learners.

A review of recent literature focused on building community in online classes and provided several key elements that are essential for students to feel engaged and connected. Included in these elements are that the professor sets the tone for the class through the establishment of an environment of open communication, availability, and interaction (Karchmer-Klein, 2020; O'Malley, 2017; Ornelles et al., 2019; Wehler, 2018). The reality is that many online courses are “based solely on text discussion...that really results in an anemic experience” (O'Mally, 2017, para. 2). It is important that the professors and students connect with one another socially, cognitively, and through the instructional learning environment (Ornelles et al., 2019). This is most efficiently done when a professor acknowledges the personal

factors each student brings to the class, encourages social interaction both during synchronous meetings and when students are working asynchronously, and designing projects that incorporate elements of problem-based learning. Structuring assignments that require interaction both inside and outside of the classroom provides for opportunities with engagement and interaction that supports the building of community and the connectedness needed for students to overcome the traditional feeling of isolation often associated with online learning (Ornelles, et al., 2019).

**The Elementary Program**

The university where the program is located is a public land-grant research instruction in the southeastern part of Virginia. The students apply to the program seeking an M.A.Ed and licensure in Elementary Education Prek-6. Students traditionally apply in the fall or spring during their senior year in their undergraduate program. A traditional cohort includes approximately 30 students who then begin the program immediately following their spring undergraduate graduation. The Curriculum and Instruction M.A.Ed with licensure for teaching grades PreK-6 can be completed within 12 months if students have completed two additional courses required for licensure (usually completed during their final semester of their undergraduate program). Those courses are Psychological Foundations for Teachers and Educating Exceptional Learners across the Life Span. These can be taken at the end of their master’s program which would then result in 14 months for completion of the program. Table 1 demonstrates the schedule for completing coursework in the M.A.Ed program.

*Table 1*

*Overview of the M.A.Ed : Curriculum & Instruction (Licensure-PreK-6)*

<b>Summer One (6 Hrs)</b>	<b>Summer Two (6 Hrs)</b>	<b>Fall (18 Hrs)</b>	<b>Spring (18 Hrs)</b>
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Theory & Practice in Early Literacy Instruction PK-3	Linguistic Theory & Instruction in Reading and Written Expression	Theory & Practice in Content Literacy Instruction 3-6	Culturally Responsive Teaching & Classroom Management
Adv C & I Elem/Middle Math	Research on Assessing Student Achievement	Adv C & I Elem Math 4-8	Elementary School Curriculum
		Adv C & I Elem/Middle Science	Elementary STEM Education
		Adv C & I Elem/Middle Soc Studies	
		Field Studies (6)	Internship in Education (9)

Completing the master's degree program over the course of 12 to 14 months means that the students who enter this program spend many hours together in courses and field placements with the members of their cohort. Though many natural bonds form between the students and the leaders and primary professors in the program, we also work to encourage camaraderie, collaboration, and a true community of practice (Wenger, 2018). For most of the students, this community of practice continues during their internship and student teaching placements and after graduation as they embark on their teaching careers and continue to network with their former cohort members.

### **Covid-19 Challenges**

During the spring of 2020, the cohort of 27 students were approximately halfway through their student teaching experience and most had already taken over as the primary teacher in the classroom when schools closed. Though the closure was anticipated, it still came as a shock when the Governor announced on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 that all schools would close until further notice. With little preparation, teachers across the commonwealth had to quickly learn how to teach their students virtually, and many of the school divisions were unsure of how to

incorporate the student teachers into this new model. This left the student teachers feeling lost and confused; and although some were permitted to support or teach during the shutdown, some school districts did not allow them to participate. The sadness that settled over the cohort was palpable. The students worked diligently to try to find ways to assist their cooperating teachers and the students in their placements, however, the overall experience fell short of the high expectations held for the student teaching semester.

We, as their professors, continued to meet with them for our scheduled seminar virtually rather than in person. Additionally, contact was made with the cooperating teachers to help identify areas where the student teachers might provide instructional assistance with students through online lessons, materials production, or preparing packets to send home to those without internet access. All student teachers within this cohort were able to complete the required number of hours for licensure due to some flexibility provided by the state department of education. The students and professors gathered online prior to the virtual graduation to allow for a congratulatory celebration on completion of the program and to commend the students for flexibility and determination during a global pandemic, but, nonetheless, it all fell short of expectations.

As the cohort was completing their less than desirable end to the program, a new group of 28 new students was nervous to begin their journey to becoming a teacher. These students submitted their applications during the previous fall or spring. In early May, the university announced all summer classes would be held virtually. The summer sessions had traditionally been the catalyst for the cohort to become a community of practice (Wenger, 2018). Due to the intense nature of the summer sessions, students would spend long hours in class getting to know their cohort, work collaboratively on projects, and form bonds that would carry them through the

more challenging components of the program. Additionally, field trips were planned to local educational settings, social events, and other collaborative exercises to help them grow as a community. The question that loomed was how to build a cohort that would be a community of learners through virtual classes?

### **Overview of a Typical Cohort Experience**

As demonstrated in Table 1, students enroll in two courses in each of the Summer I and Summer II sessions. Each class normally meets for three hours (one section in the morning and one section in the afternoon) Monday through Wednesday. This schedule was designed to give students opportunities to engage in partner work for either/both of their classes on Thursdays or Fridays. So, although there were only three scheduled class days, the additional two weekdays were included in the design of the courses. Multiple opportunities for partner work were embedded into classes to continue building community.

### **Transitioning from Face to Face to a Virtual Cohort**

All of the professors for both summer sessions met as soon as the announcement was made that all classes would be virtual. As professors, we knew that teaching the courses with the original schedule would be a challenge, not only for the professors, but more specifically for the students. It was difficult to imagine students sitting at a computer for two virtual three-hour classes back to back each day and we knew it would not be conducive for active learning or processing of information.

Through virtual discussions, a compromise was developed that courses would be taught in a hybrid format integrating both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Instead of the classes meeting Monday through Wednesday (three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon), the schedule was adjusted to allow more flexibility for the students. In each session,

the literacy class would be taught two mornings a week while math would be taught the other two mornings. It was determined that this compromise would be better suited for student instruction.

This schedule was shared with students for feedback prior to finalizing it and was met with approval and relief. The students did not want to sit in front of their screens for six to seven hours a day and then spend even more time on their computers preparing for the next day's class. At this point, the professors had not yet determined how we would build community within a virtual cohort.

### **Curriculum Components and Resources**

Traditionally, the courses involved a lot of hands-on work with both early literacy and math manipulatives. In previous semesters, course professors prepared, and distributed manipulatives owned by the university for instructional activities. This practice ensured students could engage in authentic practice using the literacy and math manipulatives that they might use in their own classrooms. Because distributing hands-on manipulatives was not possible in a virtual setting, it was decided that in addition to the textbooks selected for the courses, students would also be required to purchase kits and other materials for all summer courses. The kits selected for the literacy courses included upper- and lower-case magnetic letters, leveled readers, chart paper, and a choice from a list of picture books for comprehension instruction. Math manipulative kits included colored pencils, index cards, graph paper, and a designated hands-on collection of resources. The use of the manipulatives for instruction was modeled in class and then students were given opportunities to actively practice using them. Additionally, students were assigned to breakout rooms to work collaboratively with classmates to design and practice

lessons. This allowed for establishing relationships with both professors and classmates through the interactive lesson development and practice.

For fall courses, the university gave professors the option of holding classes smaller than 50 in person, in a hybrid format, or all online. All classes with enrollments over 50 were to be held remotely. Again, the professors who would be working with these students met to discuss how to address the fall semester. Many of the area school districts opted to follow a hybrid student grouping protocol that included students broken down into smaller groups and assigned days of attendance by letters of the alphabet. For most divisions, students would be in the buildings, depending upon grade levels, on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays with Wednesdays held open for cleaning and professional development. In order to allow students as much opportunity to be in the schools as possible, we moved classes previously scheduled for Tuesdays to Wednesdays since students could not be in their placements on Wednesday.

The university mandated that all classes begin remotely for the first two weeks of the semester to allow students to quarantine before in person classes could meet. We knew it was imperative to try as much as possible to allow for the building of community and to check in on the wellbeing of our students. We also understood that the summer course schedules had led to many of them feeling isolated and afraid of contracting the virus. Of the five classes the cohort was scheduled to take in the fall, three of the courses were meeting remotely in a synchronous online format and two were scheduled to meet face to face on campus. Students were also assigned a 20 hour a week internship placement, for which they had the additional requirement of following their specific school division's Covid-19 guidelines.

After the first two weeks of classes, an increase in Covid-19 cases both on campus and in the region forced the cohort to continue classes virtually. Additionally, some of the school

divisions who had started in-person instruction switched to remote instruction for two weeks with the rise in cases. Although it was important to start in-person instruction, the professors decided to survey the students to determine their comfort level for meeting campus. The overall response from the students was that they wanted to meet face-to-face but would prefer to meet virtually to limit the possibility of exposure to the Covid virus. The students wanted to earn as many internship hours as possible even if this meant they would have to isolate themselves from classmates. Their requests were honored and all courses were online through the end of October.

### **Strategies Implemented to Build A Community of Practice**

**Morning meetings.** Several strategies used during the summer courses that allowed for a sense of community included whole cohort virtual town hall meetings to address common concerns and questions, in class group assignments that encouraged interaction and collaboration with class members, and in-class breakout rooms tasks that allowed for mixed groups to work toward a common goal or accomplish a task. Additionally, morning meeting activities (Kriete & Davis, 2017) were used as “getting to know you” activities to facilitate opportunities for students to engage in informal discussions related to more personal or shared experiences for building community. Examples of morning meeting themes that helped students to get to know one another and helped to build community included the sharing of bags with personal items, poetry slams (with props and personal poetry), and temperature checks (how are you feeling activities). Students were also challenged to lead the morning meetings to allow for practice engaging others in a virtual environment.

**Group assignments and presentations.** Group projects and presentations had always been foundational in the coursework across the program. Therefore, extra effort was put into designing assignments that would allow for collaboration and the building of community. Many

assignments were structured to include opportunities for students to share their background, experiences, and personal characteristics. This was accomplished through the creation of poetry, stories, and the sharing of educational experiences and challenges. Once completed, items such as “the best part of me” poems were combined into a class anthology that was shared digitally with the students. Additionally, Zoom breakout rooms were utilized to assign students both randomly and manually to allow for multiple opportunities to be grouped with different individuals.

In the past when the courses met in person, students would collaborate more during scheduled course meetings but then work on bigger projects independently outside of class. Due to the hybrid format and the limited amount of synchronous time, much of class time was spent sharing the content and meeting for small group discussions. Larger assignments, including unit planning, were done outside of class in small groups or with partners. Originally, students were allowed to self-select their partners for projects but found they preferred the automatic group assignment feature on Zoom because it was difficult to find group partners when you were not physically in class together.

The incorporation of different technology platforms also increased engagement during class and groups assignments. Students created FlipGrid book walks (<https://info.flipgrid.com/>), Jamboard word sorts (Google Suite), Storyboard (<https://www.storyboardthat.com/>) poetry collections, and Canva (<https://www.canva.com/>) anchor charts. The professors also took advantage of materials that would have traditionally required a membership fee, like Raz-Kids (<https://www.raz-kids.com/>) that allowed for free access due to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic. The goal was to not only increase class engagement but also to encourage

exploration of technology they could use in their internship, student teaching, and future classroom.

**Field trip.** As the fall semester progressed, it became apparent that a group gathering was needed in order to continue to build our community of practice and to further the relationship we were striving to build with the students. The decision was made to schedule a visit to a local pumpkin patch and Christmas tree farm to provide just this type of experience. The outdoor space and ability to social distance would allow engagement with one another on a personal level. Of our 28 cohort members, only 25 were able to attend due to three members needing to quarantine as a result of Covid-19 exposure. Others who attended included two professors, four university supervisors, and the Associate Director of Academic Programs. The pumpkin patch chosen for our event often hosts elementary students and provided an experience that was both enjoyable and educational. Students were able to collect instructional ideas for teaching the difference between evergreen and deciduous trees, the need to rotate crops for optimal production of pumpkins, and the use of children's literature in teaching about agriculture. This face-to-face meeting proved to be a highlight of our fall semester and a welcome change from our traditional zoom classes.

**Availability.** Throughout the summer and fall, students were reminded continuously that we were available to them should they have any concerns or if they just needed to talk. When possible, classes were ended 15 minutes early to allow for individual students to have one-on-one meetings with the professor or for small groups of students to ask questions about assignments. Open lines of communication and flexible availability assisted with making connections with the students and provided opportunities to alleviate anxiety and fear that naturally occurs during periods of isolation and uncertainty.

Additionally, town hall meetings were scheduled that brought together all of the members of the cohort at one time to address questions, concerns, and essential program information. This allowed for control over the flow of information to the students and limited confusion that comes when information is passed from student to student rather than from program leaders. University Supervisors, Professors, and the Associate Director of the Office of Academic Programs were included in these group meetings so as to give students access to all information for their placements, the campus guidelines, as well as information about their courses. These meetings were especially helpful as fall semester placements progressed to allow for the sharing of updates from our school district partners. Over the course of the summer and fall semesters, a total of four town hall meetings were utilized to disseminate information, address misunderstandings, and answer questions.

### **Internships Placements and Experiences**

Internship placements proved to be a challenge for programs across the commonwealth. In previous years, students were placed at one of three districts for their fall field-based internship and were then placed in a different district for their spring student teaching placement. The different placements provided experiences both in regard to the diversity of student populations within the districts and opportunities to teach at both lower and upper grade levels. Placement requests were disseminated to public-school partners to determine if our students would be able to have face-to-face field experience placements in the fall. The professors were well aware that area districts were still grappling with what their opening plans would be and how they could best provide for the safety of their students and teachers. Of the three districts we reached out to for placements, two of the districts were still willing to commit to allowing our students to participate to whatever degree was possible. The third district, the most diverse of our

placements, was not willing to commit to accepting interns or student teachers. This information forced us to scramble, along with other colleges and universities in the region, to make other arrangements for student placements. By late August we had confirmed placements for all of the students, but we still do not know what type of experiences our students would get or what restrictions would be placed on them in order to be able to remain in the schools. We were fortunate that the southwest region of Virginia had not experienced the spikes in Covid-19 cases that other regions in Virginia had experienced and that the majority of our students would be able to get experiences in a face-to-face environment.

**Expectations for field placements.** Through virtual town hall meetings and email communications, we continued to inform our students of the expectations of the university, the local school districts, and the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Thankfully, our local school divisions followed the guidelines from the CDC when establishing protocol for social distancing, the wearing of masks, and exposure to or diagnosis with Covid-19. It was not easy to tell 28 college students that they needed to wear masks/face shields at their placements, continue to social distance whenever possible, stay away from groups of people larger than 10, and to constantly track their health.

One of our biggest challenges was working with them to handle the social engagements, primarily weddings, that they had committed themselves to attending prior to the start of the semester. Many of their friends had postponed weddings from the spring to the fall when the pandemic hit, and they wanted to attend these events. Multiple meetings were held with students, program leaders, and the Associate Director of Academic Programs trying to determine that, if the student attended a wedding on a specific Saturday, they would have to wait five days to get a Covid-19 test, and then quarantine until their results became available. Several students came to

the realization that staying on campus and attending the wedding virtually was the safest option, but not without a profound feeling of loss for the celebrations being missed.

Covid-19 exposures and testing also provided challenges throughout the fall semester. Several of the members of the cohort had a roommate or friend who had tested positive or was exposed and then they had to follow the protocol to make sure they did not have Covid-19 leading to missed time in their placements through no fault of their own. This led to several students missing weeks at a time in their placements. The goal for the fall internship placements was for students to accumulate as many hours as possible of face-to-face teaching so that we would have these hours if schools shut down again like they had the previous spring. Students were aware of how lucky they were getting any form of in-person placement and that they needed these opportunities desperately in order to be well prepared for student teaching and their future classrooms.

**Intern observations and evaluations.** One request from our school district partners was that all field based observations and meetings would be done virtually. Students had traditionally been asked to create a video of one lesson during their fall placement but never for their entire experience. In order to accommodate this request, the number of required formal observations versus informal observations of lessons was reduced and a protocol was established with the school divisions to allow for virtual observations to be conducted without compromising students who had not given permission to have their image recorded. Ultimately, it was decided that the interns would continue to submit one lesson in a video format but that the remainder of the observations, mid-term conferences, and final conferences would all be done virtually by the University Supervisor and would not be recorded. Due to the smaller class sizes and social distancing being implemented in the classrooms, it was not difficult to set up the computer being

used for the observation to focus on the intern rather than the students within the individual classrooms.

As the fall semester progressed, two of the cooperating teachers with interns switched from a hybrid format to a totally virtual format. Rather than changing their placement, these students were permitted to continue with their assigned teacher and to teach their formal and informal (observed) lessons, virtually. For all students, the log of hours was redesigned to include a column to designate whether the hours were earned in a face-to-face setting or remotely. Students who were in quarantine due to attendance at a social event, a Covid-19 exposure, or a positive test result, worked with their sponsoring teacher, whenever possible, to teach remotely while quarantining.

### **Conclusion**

Though the program leaders felt like we were trying to build a bridge while crossing it, the overall conclusion was that success was achieved in building a connected cohort of students who were beginning to include many of the key elements of a community of practice. This connection was evident in the group projects submitted, the observed support students gave one another when faced with Covid-19 exposures, during the face-to-face group gatherings at the pumpkin patch, and the feedback received at the conclusion of the semester. Though the experience of going from face-to-face to a virtual cohort model went well, challenges along the way allowed the opportunity for program leaders to pause and reflect on practices when working with students in a virtual environment.

One challenge that was ongoing was placement of students for their student teaching experience for the spring semester. Though all students were placed for the fall internship experiences, teachers in the field seemed less likely to take a student teacher for the spring

semester. The human resources contact in the partner school divisions indicated that they were having a difficult time finding enough student teaching placements. Traditionally, the teachers in the partnership districts were eager to volunteer to have a student teacher but given the current challenges they were facing to provide instruction; it seemed that they felt that a student teacher was one more obligation on their already full plates.

Due to the many one-on-one meetings required from students traveling to weddings, family events, or to other engagements, we had a town hall meeting to talk about the upcoming spring semester and student teaching. Though it was not the intention of program leaders, the stern warnings about traveling out of town and remaining vigilant on social distancing came across as insensitive to our cohort. Thankfully, due to the work on creating connections with students and keeping a line of communication open, several students reached out to express their feelings about the message to let us know that they believed they were doing all they could and did not feel this effort was acknowledged.

We understand now, that even as we navigated to create this community of practice for our students, they were also trying to cross the bridge that we were building. More attention was needed on the feelings of isolation students were experiencing while trying to meet the guidelines and expectations for the university, their school divisions, and what we expect from them while they are in the program. Although they were in placements during the week, they were still isolated from their families and most were diligent about socially distancing from the peers because they wanted to be with their students in the field. Balancing expectations with the acknowledgement of the sacrifices that they were making in order to become a teacher needs to always be at the forefront of the decisions that are being made when preparing future teachers in this current climate. Modeling the expectations and practices that we expected of them to utilize

in their future classrooms is paramount to creating a community of practice that promotes a community of learning.

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