

Independence and Interdependence: An Analysis of Pre-Service Candidates' Use of Focused Assignments on an Electronic Discussion Forum During the Initial Field Experience

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This article describes a case study using an electronic learning platform for creating an interactive learning community through asynchronous discussion to enhance the initial field experience of secondary math and English teacher candidates enrolled in Field Experience. We identified three problems with the field experience course—lack of structure, isolation of the candidates in the field, and passivity of the candidates. To address these problems, we established three goals—to create a way for candidates to structure their reflections in the field, to create a learning community of pre-professionals, and to foster independence and assertiveness in our candidates. With these goals in mind, focused assignments were developed and implemented in an interactive online discussion forum. The results of this study have two important implications for teacher preparation. First, the results suggest that with focused assignments and guidelines for peer interaction, on-line peer discussions can be a powerful tool in helping candidates to reflect on student learning and the student perspective in the classroom with virtually no University-Based Teacher Educator intervention. Secondly, the study reveals that the use of technology with focused assignments can be helpful in creating more assertive, independent candidates who are better able to think about and negotiate the school environments in which they plan careers.

Keywords: field experience, learning communities, isolation, candidates, peer support, eSupervision, reflection, technology

As technology becomes more ubiquitous in our society, colleges of education are exploring how to “leverage” technology to be “a highly effective tool” in our educational toolkit as we prepare tomorrow’s teachers (Swenson & Redmond, 2009, p. 6, 9). Advances in computer technology, including electronic learning platforms (Meyers, 2006; Nicholson & Bond, 2003), video annotation tools (Rich & Hannafin, 2009), video-enhanced observations (Sewall, 2009), video case studies (Sherin & van Es, 2005), digital exhibitions (Hatch & Grossman, 2009), eSupervision (Alger & Kopcha, 2009), online mentoring (Knapczyk, Hew, Frey, & Wall-Marencik, 2005), and blogs (Stiler & Philleo, 2003; Wassell & Crouch, 2008) are being implemented at institutions of higher learning and have created “opportunities for improved delivery of instruction” as teacher education programs work to make “productive use of the improved technology available” to increase “the educative value of experience in the classroom” (Nicholson & Bond, 2003, p. 756). This case study describes just such an attempt in which Blackboard, particularly focused assignments in the Discussion Forum, was used to create an interactive learning community

through asynchronous discussion to enhance the initial field experience of secondary math and English candidates.¹

Background

Field experiences have long been valued as essential for the preparation of teachers, but empirical data on the effects of different types of field experiences has been sparse and inconclusive (Shanahan, 2008). A recent report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning conceded that there is “not a large research base on what makes clinical preparation effective” (NCATE, 2010, p. iv). Researchers recognized that learning within field experiences is “highly contextualized and uneven” (Capraro, Capraro, & Helfeldt, 2010, p. 132). For example, Capraro, Capraro, and Helfeldt (2010) compared three different types of field experiences to measure the effect of differentiated field experiences on the perceived level of confidence of teacher candidates. They found no statistically significant difference in perceived teacher competencies and further determined that the amount of time spent in the field was not as important as other factors such as the selection, development, and partnerships with clinical faculty and districts.

However, existing research does suggest the importance of guidance and structure to the field experience. Posner (2005) cautions against candidates simply doing a “field experience without thinking deeply about it, [allowing their] experiences to wash over [them] without savoring and examining them for their significance” (p. 21). Whipp (2003) and Dawson (2006) stress that teacher candidates “need considerable guidance and support to think critically about their experiences” (Whipp, p. 321).

Additionally, research points to the importance of having a connection between course activities and the field experience. When the practicum is aligned with theoretical and evidence-based teaching procedures studied in a course, the result is more “in depth learning” (Frey, 2008, p. 199; see also Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, & Doone, 2006; Slavkin, 2002; Zeichner, 2010). Candidates in practica need structured experiences in the field where they are able to make connections with and apply educational course content (Allsopp et al., 2006).

As part of our ongoing program evaluation and revision, we recognized that our field experience course was not satisfying the criteria above nor was it meeting candidates’ needs. We identified three problems with this course. First, we noticed the lack of structure. Second, we observed the isolation of candidates in the field. Thirdly, we identified an issue with the passivity of candidates, which we considered largely a consequence of the first two problems.

In the secondary English and math programs at our University, candidates take their first sustained field experience course in the second phase of their education coursework. Candidates are required to visit and observe in a school environment one full day a week for fifteen weeks. Each candidate is assigned a Mentor Teacher to observe and a University-Based Teacher Educator² who oversees the placements and makes two short field visits.

¹ More recently, candidates in the small health science program have joined the group for Field Experience.

² Here and elsewhere, the term Mentor Teacher is used to refer to the Cooperating Teacher; University-Based Teacher Educator is used to refer to the University Supervisor. This language helps to foster an idea of partnership and to eliminate some of the hierarchical bias of the more traditional terms.

First, we recognized the weak structure of the field experience course (no classroom meetings and only two brief field visits by the University-Based Teacher Educator), which allowed little room for the University-Based Teacher Educator to guide candidates about goals and expectations. An additional challenge was its placement in the program. The field experience course was a stand-alone course. It was not linked with any other education coursework and candidates entered the fieldwork without any previous, and in some cases, without any concurrent methods coursework. Second, and partly as a result of the above, candidates taking the field experience course felt isolated. They were often placed alone (without other candidates) with little opportunity to share and articulate their observations and opinions with other candidates or the University-Based Teacher Educator. As a result, they were struggling to make meaning out of their time in the schools. Third, the candidates needed to become more responsible for their own learning, avoiding the passivity observed by both University-Based Teacher Educators and Mentor Teachers. We hoped more assertive, independent candidates would take ownership over their education and the professional opportunities presented by their field experience. The difficulty was reshaping the field experience course to make it meaningful for candidates without substantially increasing the workload for the University-Based Teacher Educator or the candidate, given the unalterable configuration of credits.³ Sewall (2009) notes similar “constraints on time, resources, and even energy” in her discussion of the challenges of fieldwork and supervision (p. 12).

To provide a structure to the overall field experience, we designed focused assignments and gave candidates concrete goals for their observations so their time in the field was no longer amorphous. Responses to these assignments were to be posted to a Discussion Forum, and peer responses to candidate postings were required. Our thinking was that these assignments would create an online collaborative learning community that would provide maximum interaction among candidates without substantially increasing the workload for the University-Based Teacher Educator. Because research shows there are drawbacks to open-ended and unstructured online discussions and points out the benefits of specific categories for discussion and clear expectations for participation, we designed our assignments and peer responses to meet that recommendation (Aune, 2002; Nonis, Bronack, & Heaton, 2000; Romano & Schwartz, 2005). We also hoped the online community would alleviate the isolation of field work (Edens, 2000; Frey, 2008). As Dutt-Doner and Powers (2000) note, an electronic forum can be “a way of sharing feelings ... relief[ing] stress and support[ing] each other” as well as a “safe place to share their honest feelings” (p. 160). In particular, Nicholson and Bond (2003) found that the discussion board could function as “a place for professional support and community [where] preservice teachers’ reflective thinking develop[s] over time” (p. 259). Through the support of a cohort, we had expectations that the candidates would become more independent—negotiating with their Mentor Teachers, asserting and inserting themselves into the work of the classroom, and finding opportunities to enhance the learning experience themselves. Indeed, Mason (2000) argues that the “inherent nature of CMC [computer mediated communication] motivates individuals to take more responsibility for their learning” (p. 8). We hoped the electronic medium would not only alleviate the passivity of candidates but also make explicit our expectations that candidates show initiative and write about their experience as part of several assignments.

³ The University-Based Teacher Educator is given .25 credits per candidate, out of a regular 12 credit per semester credit load. For candidates, Field Experience is one credit out of a typical class load of 12-18 credits.

Because most candidates began their field experience without methods coursework, we designed our assignments to focus largely on observation rather than teaching. We wanted candidates to develop their abilities to reflect on the student perspective and begin to think about how student learning can be affected by the classroom, school, or administrative environment; classroom pedagogy; student culture(s); and student background(s). We hoped this practice of focusing on the student perspective in the classroom would help candidates keep the student perspective in mind when they began to teach and reframe the many different classroom challenges they face.

The Assignments

Candidates were asked to complete several assignments over the course of the semester. Each assignment was written with a specific purpose in mind—to enhance the initial field experience of secondary math and English teacher candidates.

***Describe Your Day** – Briefly (one paragraph) describe a typical day in your practicum visits. What do you do? What have you been able to observe?*

***Teaching Opportunities and Observing Other Teachers – Part 1:** Briefly describe any opportunities you may have had to assist in teaching, whether one on one, small group, or whole class instruction. Also discuss the ways in which you have tried (successfully or not) to insert yourself into the instructional work of the classroom.*

As mentioned above, we were less interested in candidates gaining classroom-teaching experience than we were in their gaining experience being assertive in seeking ways to include themselves in the work of the classroom. In particular, we wanted candidates to practice the important skill of negotiating with the Mentor Teacher over their role in the classroom.⁴ Our goal with this assignment was for the candidates to negotiate a role for themselves in the classroom that allowed them to engage in substantive ways with the students such as designing and teaching an entire lesson of their own, teaching a lesson prepared by the Mentor Teacher, working with groups, assisting students one-on-one, or tutoring after school or at lunch.

***Part 2:** Discuss your observation of a teacher other than your Mentor Teacher. Describe how you came to have the opportunity to observe this teacher (your own initiative, Mentor Teacher's suggestion, substitute, etc.). Explain the subject, level, and grade of the class you observed. Reflect on the differences between this teacher and your Mentor Teacher.*

Our goals with this assignment were twofold. Since every teacher has his/her own style, observing other teachers allowed candidates to better understand what they saw happening in their Mentor Teacher's classroom and where their Mentor Teachers fit within the larger culture of the school. In addition, this assignment required candidates to show initiative in seeking opportunities to observe teachers other than their Mentor Teachers. Candidates were encouraged to seek permission to use preparation periods to observe as many different types of classes in their subject

⁴ Candidates regularly struggled with negotiations with Mentor Teachers during Internship (student teaching) experiences. Therefore some assignments for Field Experience provided an important formative experience in developing this skill.

areas as possible and as many different teachers as possible, even teachers outside their subject area.

Co-Teaching Observation – *For this assignment, you will be observing a class co-taught by a general education (GE) teacher and special education (SE) teacher. Before you begin, please read Co-Teaching (Cramer, 2010) and review Stages of Co-Teaching & the Co-Teaching Observation Rubric (Gately & Gately, 2001). When you are ready to complete the co-teaching observation rubric, give a rating in each category, using the descriptions in the Co-Teaching Observation Rubric. In addition, write a short narrative in which you describe the class you observed and discuss the behavior you saw that led you to give the ratings that you did in each performance category. Indicate in the narrative which co-teaching approach you think best describes the class you observed.*

The goal of the “Co-Teaching Observation” assignment was to allow candidates to identify and think about the kinds of collaborative teaching they were observing in their field experience. Because the math and English programs offered little coursework to prepare candidates to understand the dynamics of co-teaching and collaboration, we gave them a brief reading assignment on co-teaching written by Cramer (2010). The second reading, Gately and Gately (2001) and its accompanying rubric, offered candidates specific criteria on which to focus (i.e., what to look for) including the physical arrangement of the classroom, balance of instructional presentation, etc. In addition, as with our other assignments, the “Co-Teaching Observation” required some assertiveness on the part of candidates in seeking a co-teaching classroom to visit, if their Mentor Teacher was not involved in a co-teaching scenario.

Reflective Journal (completed twice) – *Observe and reflect about what you see happening in the classroom. I am particularly interested in your observations and reflections about the reasons students both are and are not succeeding academically. What reactions, attitudes, and feelings do you observe in the students towards the teacher, the classwork, the atmosphere and structure of the school? Are the students’ reactions amplified or modified by the teaching strategy, classroom and/or school environment, material, or teaching style? In order to begin to think reflectively about these questions, you will need to observe and listen carefully and reflect, in writing, on what you see and hear. Consider addressing the following overlapping subject areas:*

1. *Classroom environment – distractions, physical layout and seating arrangements, facilities and materials of classroom, overall appearance of classroom*
2. *School environment – distractions, physical layout, condition, and appearance, general atmosphere*
3. *Administrative environment – presence and actions of non-teaching personnel, sense or lack of community*

4. *Classroom pedagogy – time management and pacing, clarity of directions, teacher’s attitude toward students, teacher’s attitude toward subject, teacher’s attitude toward the learning and achievement of all students*
5. *Student culture – general student expectations about learning and achievement, use of uniforms, student preparedness for class, student attitudes about the teacher, the class, the subject, school, learning, and achievement*
6. *Student background – consider the special concerns and/or needs of English language learners or immigrant students*

Write a journal entry (1-2 pages) in which you think through and write critically about the relationship between the elements of the school environment on the one hand and the student learning on the other. Be sure to be specific and concrete in describing what you are seeing. Be careful to combine your description and summary of what you have seen with your own conclusions about student learning.

This more substantive reflection required the candidates to think through and write critically about the relationship between the elements of the school and student learning. The “Reflective Journal” assignment provided us with the opportunity to assess how well the candidates were learning to “visualize” the classroom from the student perspective.

Peer Responses – Ten times over the course of the semester (or five times per half semester), candidates were expected to “respond” via Blackboard to their peers’ work. Candidates were given some latitude over these responses, although they needed to include at least four responses (or two per half semester) to the more lengthy reflective journals.

Quantitative Outcomes

One interesting result was candidates’ high level of participation in terms of time and contribution to the on-line discussions. There were two types of participation measured—reading and posting. If each candidate read the minimum number of postings by their peers, we expected 160 readings to take place (16 candidates with 10 required responses each). Surprisingly, the 16 candidates read a total of 5,096 postings by their peers, which was more than 30 times what we expected. The number of postings expected for each candidate was 16 (6 reflections of their own and 10 responses to their peers). All candidates except one had at least 16 postings.⁵ For the 16 candidates, a total of 256 postings were expected. At the end of the semester, the actual number of postings was 361. Table 1 displays the results of candidates’ Blackboard discussion participation.

⁵ That candidate had only 2 postings.

Table 1
Blackboard Discussion Participation by Candidates*

Type of Participation	Minimum Number Expected	Actual Number
Peer Postings Read	160	5,096
Postings (Reflecting or Responding)	256	361

*N = 16

When looking at the amount of time involved in preparing assignments, 16 candidates invested about 165 hours during the semester for this one-credit course. Because candidates were encouraged to compose their work off-line where they could take their time and edit the material, it is likely that the total time invested was greater than 165 hours. The maximum amount of time logged on to the course website by a candidate over the semester was 19 hours and 38 minutes; the minimum was 1 hour and 12 minutes. Fifteen of the sixteen candidates spent 7 hours or more, which is equivalent to about 30 minutes per week, to complete their field experience assignments. Table 2 shows the distribution of total on-line time by candidates, as well as a weekly equivalence of that time.

Table 2
Total Time On-line Candidates

Total Time	Number of Candidates (N=16)	Approximate Weekly Equivalence
15 hours or more	3	1 hour/week or more
11 hours or more but less than 15 hours	2	45 min/week – 1 hour/week
7 hours or more but less than 11 hours	10	30 min/week – 45 min/week
Less than 7 hours	1	Less than 30 min/week

The correlation (correlation coefficient = 0.77) between the number of hours a candidate spent on-line and the number of messages posted was significant ($p < 0.001$).⁶ The significant positive relationship suggests that the time spent on-line was spent productively, making observations of their own and replying to peers' responses.

In an effort to ascertain whether the focused assignments were of value in enhancing candidates' student perspectives, their journals were assessed based on the candidates' attention to the student perspective as one criterion. Nine of 14 candidates exceeded expectations with regard to this criterion in both journals. Five candidates were less successful. Table 3 presents a comparison of

⁶ We removed one outlier, a candidate who had posted more than 3 times the number of expected postings.

the two groups with respect to average time on-line, average number of posts, and average number of readings. There was little difference between the groups in both amount of time spent on-line and number of postings. However, there was a great difference between the groups in the number of postings read. The nine candidates who demonstrated they could consider the student perspective averaged 368 readings per candidate, whereas the five candidates who were less successful at considering the student perspective averaged 279 readings per candidate. This difference is not statistically significant due to the small sample sizes and the large variability, but it appears to indicate that it is not the amount of time spent on-line that affected candidates' perceptions but rather the quality of the time. Candidates who read more about their peers' observations and reflections were able to make gains in identifying and considering the student perspective.

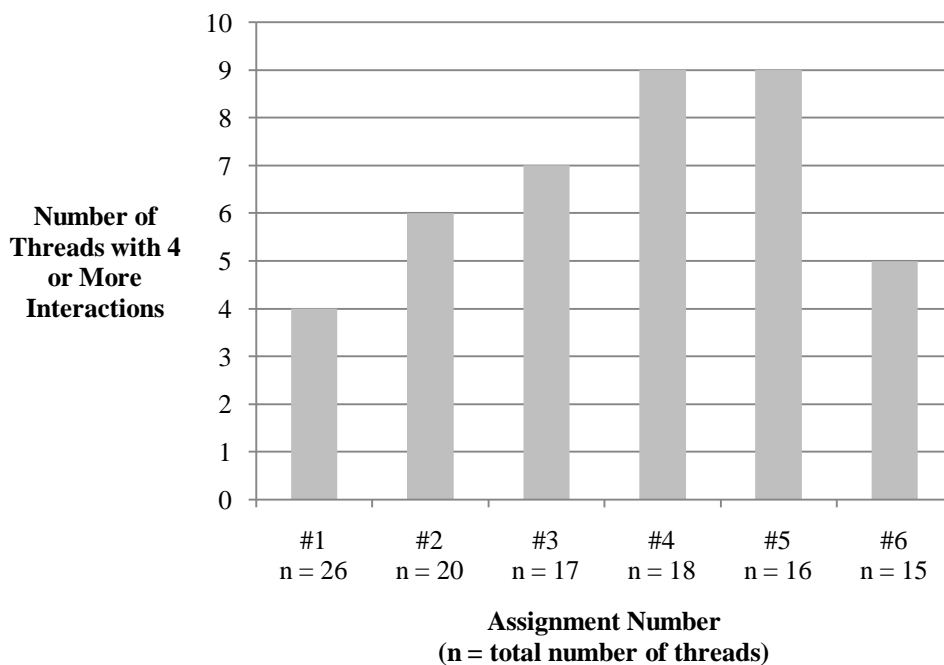
Table 3
Comparison of Candidates Who Did and Did Not Excel at Attaining the Student Perspective

	Average Number of Hours On-line	Average Number of Posts	Average Number of Readings
Group Who Excelled at Attaining Student Perspective (n = 9)	11.6 hours	25.2	368
Group Who Did Not Excel at Attaining Student Perspective (n = 5)	11.9 hours	22.2	279

Since one of our goals was to minimize the isolation that candidates experienced and use the Blackboard platform to create a supportive learning community, we also wanted to investigate the value of the discussion forum in encouraging interaction among the candidates. Since the discussion forum allowed the creation of "threads," it was possible to track the length of conversations. Threads were as short as one posting (a candidate posted; no one responded) to as many as 9 interactions. Although we considered threads with four or more interactions to be true conversations, it is possible to find merit in threads with fewer interactions. As shown in Figure 1, the number of threads with four or more interactions increased over the course of the semester as the candidates reached out to receive and gain support from each other.⁷ The fourth and fifth assignments show the greatest number of threads with four or more interactions (9 out of 18 threads and 9 out of 16 threads, respectively). Clearly, peer interactions gained momentum over the semester as candidates sought and received support from their peers. Individual stories of that interdependence and support can be seen in the case studies that follow.

⁷ The values of n vary because some candidates initiated more than one thread, beginning a new discussion. There were sixteen candidates with one candidate (due to illness) posting assignments 3 through 6 after the end of the semester.

Figure 1
Discussion Activity as the Semester Progressed Through the Six Focused Assignments



Thus, extensive candidate participation and the correlation between candidate participation and candidate success suggest that the electronic platform far surpassed our expectations in functioning as a cyber community for our candidates.

Qualitative Outcomes

Gaining the Student Perspective

The qualitative experiences of candidates' interactions on the Discussion Forum are also indicative of the power of using an electronic platform and focused assignments. As one candidate commented (in the course evaluation), the discussion assignments helped her "look at teaching from a student's perspective as well as a teacher's perspective."

One series of interactions on the Discussion Forum makes clear the importance of focused assignments and the candidate's interaction in developing this student-centered perspective. The initial posting comes from Tara. She wrote about a disaffected student whom she watched sneaking out of gym and whose behavior she initially found "a bit scary." Tara wrote:

I learned yesterday about an immigrant student who came here from Saudi Arabia. He is suppose[d] to be a Senior, but [he] talks like broken English. He will barely change for gym. Yesterday was the first time I really recognized him and what he does.... Mrs. N., Mr. P., and I were on the track and saw this student standing behind a garbage disposal first like sneaking, which was a bit scary.... Mrs. N. said she talked to this student, I

think his name is Nagrim, he came to the United States because his father wanted him to have a better life here.⁸

Tara found Nagrim's behavior disruptive and disturbing, and she located herself within a circle of teachers trying to control him. A second candidate, Elisa, in a peer response, helped Tara reframe her understanding of Nagrim by focusing on his perspective and the possible reasons for his behavior. Elisa wrote:

As for Nagrim, he has to be in a very hard spot. If it is hard for an American student to change schools (in the same country) especially during high school years imagine this poor kid who had to move to a different country! He must be very angry inside and it's logical that at his age he might not completely understand what a better life in America means.

Elisa's insightful commentary allowed Tara to modify her initial assessment of Nagrim's behavior as "scary" and reformulate her judgment with an understanding of Nagrim's "hard position" in America. She responded back to Elisa:

Yes, Nagrim is in a hard position right now coming into a new school and country. I think he seems depressed and upset because it is hard to make friends with new students, especially if some students are rude to him. I think it will take time for him to understand the life in America from where he use[d] to live. I hope he makes friends and feels comfortable soon.

This exchange allowed Tara to rethink and reframe what might have been a dismissive observation of a vulnerable and challenging student. Her preliminary analysis was transformed through candidate-to-candidate interaction via the Discussion Forum, into a more nuanced, reflective student-centered observation.

Building on their Peers' Experiences

Another thread on the Discussion Forum demonstrates how candidates were able to learn from and build on each other's experiences. In the initial posting, Elisa recounted her experience with a student placed into a general education mathematics class when he should have been placed into a bilingual mathematics class:

I came in contact with a little boy (7th grade)... From the start the teacher pointed out to me that he needed help because his skills were very poor. At this time I'll add that the class was working on word problems. 40 minutes through I find that even with my explanations and one-on-one help the student isn't understanding even the simplest word problems.... I hesitated to ask the student if he spoke Spanish or English better at first but felt I was left with few options and I wanted to help. The student immediately opened his eyes and told me Spanish. I translated a few of the problems and he got it! He worked the problems faster than some of the other English speaking students. I was glad, in a small way, I made a difference!

⁸ This student's name was changed to preserve his anonymity.

After class I spoke with my Mentor Teacher and he was very thankful. It was only the 5th day of class and he knew something was wrong but didn't know what. He himself couldn't understand how the student was placed in that classroom.

What is remarkable about this posting is not just Elisa's resourcefulness in relation to the student and his language difficulties but also her generosity towards the Mentor Teacher. Rather than blaming the Mentor Teacher, Elisa reframes the incident as being indicative of the immense challenges teachers face: "One day we will be in the front of the classroom and not see what is happening, there will be two dozen children and things may go unseen especially as first, second, even third year teachers. There's much to learn." Her reflective attitude towards both the student and the Mentor Teacher are impressive.

Because of the Discussion Forum, other candidates benefitted from Elisa's insights. Jennifer, having read Elisa's account, was able to apply the insight to an experience of her own.

I actually had a very similar situation. One of the girls in the 7th grade math class I am in is doing extremely badly and my teacher had me work with her today. I explained the assignment to her various times and I remember having read this the day before so I asked her if she would rather speak Spanish and she said yes. After that she began to understand the problems a lot better, she still has some issues but she got better and began participating in the classroom a lot more and my Mentor Teacher congratulated her and the look on her face was just proud and I could tell that she was feeling a lot better about herself.

In part because of what she learned from Elisa, Jennifer was able to "see" this student's issue and intervene successfully to help her. The learning comes full circle when a third candidate, Ahmead, extrapolated from his peers' experiences and offered a larger commentary on the issues. Ahmead wrote:

When working in urban communities problems like this are always faced. Usually students like the boy you helped would have been labeled as just a failure [who] didn't care about work. With you helping [bridge] the language barrier, the student is more responsive and hopefully will now receive the help that's needed.

Without having witnessed this experience in his own observation, Ahmead was able to participate in the broader discussion of addressing the needs of students with language barriers. Through their interaction on the Discussion Forum, and without any intervention on the part of their University-Based Teacher Educator, the candidates were able to make sense out of and intervene positively in the lives of the students they encountered.

Independence and Taking Initiative

The Discussion Forum was also instrumental in allowing candidates to think through and support each other as they worked to take initiative for their own learning experiences to meet the requirements for various assignments. Notice, in the commentary below, how Gina framed her teaching opportunity in terms of her successful initiative:

I had my first teaching opportunity. I successfully inserted myself into the instructional work of the class by asking my Mentor Teacher, Mrs. S., if I could assist the students on a one-on-one basis as students practiced writing and constructing a five paragraph essay.... I listened to the teacher's instructions and pre-read her plan book to be able to assist the students.

Both Gina's success in the classroom and her initiative did not go unnoticed by her peers.

Nii: Gina, I liked the way you showed initiative by asking Mrs. S. to help the students one-on-one. I think it was a good idea to look at Mrs. S.'s lesson plans because you were able to remain consistent with what she was teaching.

Notice how both Gina and Nii framed Gina's success in participating in the work of the classroom with an emphasis on her initiative in negotiating with her Mentor Teacher. In this sense, they reinforced each other, and for the others who read their postings, the importance of this successful show of initiative.

Other candidates were not as successful at obtaining teaching opportunities for themselves. Realizing that assisting students was going to be a challenge for her, Megan L. was able to show initiative by seeking opportunities to observe other teachers:

I haven't had many opportunities to assist students one on one or even in small groups because of the teaching styles of my Mentor Teacher.... [A]lthough I do help my Mentor Teacher with whatever she asks of me, I have not seen much I can assist with in her classroom yet. On the other hand, because of this, I have been able to get some very good observations of my Mentor Teacher and her students. I move around the classroom or sit in different spots around the room and observe how the students react to her lessons.

I also made the initiative to go meet a fellow University student who is currently doing her Student Teaching at [the school]. I walked over and introduced myself to her and her Mentor Teacher, who were both extremely sweet and helpful. They invited me in with open arms, explaining that I can walk in whenever I liked. I visit their classroom every third period because my Mentor Teacher has a prep period and that is also a period where the Student Teacher is conducting the classroom. I usually stay for the fourth period, where her Mentor Teacher takes over, because I like to see the differences in their way of teaching.

Notice here that Megan L. was unable to negotiate a teaching role for herself in her Mentor Teacher's classroom, despite her willingness to "help her Mentor Teacher with whatever she asks of me." Instead of passively accepting this situation, Megan L. did two things to reframe the situation. First, she focused on how she could, simply through moving her seat, improve her ability to learn through observation and get the most out of that experience. Second, she used her initiative, again, like Gina, by explicitly identifying and framing her actions as such, to observe another classroom, using her ties to the Student Teacher to help her negotiate this opportunity.

Rather than bemoaning the fact that her fate was in the hands of an unsupportive Mentor Teacher, Megan L. found different ways to interact with the students and to demonstrate her negotiating skills.

Support and Interdependence

On the Discussion Forum, candidates also were able to commiserate with each other and receive support and encouragement for what might be a frustrating or disheartening experience. One candidate wrote of her inability to be “more active in the classroom” because her Mentor Teacher “lectures most of the class time.” Her peers encouraged her and made specific and constructive suggestions about how she might interject herself into the classroom, while empathizing with her situation, creating the kind of supportive community we had hoped for.

Nancy: When you feel you are ready to teach, maybe you can ask the teacher if you could teach one section, a short lesson.... Good luck when you do teach and just remember to pace yourself, that was one thing I had trouble with.

Jennifer: At least you are able to help the students while they are completing their class work. Up until last week I felt completely uncomfortable with the idea of teaching a lesson but this week I got to talk to some of the students and got to know them a little bit more and that honestly has eased my discomfort a lot. I don't think you are ever going to feel 100% ready until you try, I know I won't. Try talking to your teacher maybe to co-teach a lesson at first until you feel more comfortable. My Mentor Teacher brought this up to me and I think it would help me a lot so maybe it will work for you.

Gina: Hi Megan, I, unfortunately, do not have that option with my Mentor Teacher because she also does much of the lecturing. After every lecture, she allowed me to walk around and help individual students structure their paragraphs accordingly. Therefore, I was interested if you were able to teach this month? If you got the opportunity, how did you feel? How did the students react to you and to your lesson that day?

Megan S.: Gina, I actually did not teach yet. I am not quite ready. I am going to discuss with her this week if I can teach a lesson to one class the following week. I basically sit in the back of the classroom and when she assigns classwork, I walk around and try to help the students. Hopefully by the end of the month I will be able to teach a lesson or two.

By the end of the semester, Megan S. still had not achieved the ideal relationship with her Mentor Teacher but was, nonetheless, able to develop rapport with students in the class.

Megan S.: I did feel in the beginning apprehensive about helping the students because my Mentor Teacher did not seem to like the idea. But now, I am much more involved with the classes. I do feel a little bit of tension at times because the students will walk over to me and ask questions and the teacher orders them to sit back down. So I then feel as if I cannot help them.

While Megan S. was unable to resolve the issues she had with her Mentor Teacher, she was able to use the Discussion Forum to place that relationship in context and to understand from her peers that she was not alone in trying to solve these issues.

Reframing Negative Models

The “Co-Teaching” assignment is perhaps the best evidence of the success of the Blackboard platform. We came to this conclusion because we perceived the candidates as being least prepared by their previous coursework to tackle this assignment, and we had some trepidation about the candidates’ ability to read and process the material on their own and apply it to the classrooms they were observing. However, one thread shows how well the candidates engaged the material. Nii wrote of his opportunity to observe an inclusion teacher working with two different content area teachers:

I was able to observe Mrs. S., a special education teacher working with two different teachers who taught English. The first class was with Mr. Sh. It was apparent that Mrs. S. and Mr. Sh. were in the collaborating stage of co-teaching according to Gately’s teaching rubric. They cracked a few jokes while Mrs. S. introduced me to Mr. Sh. which demonstrated that they had a working relationship. Right away Mr. Sh. stated that they team taught. He explained that in regular teaching situation, they take turns teaching. For example, Mr. Sh. may do the opening and Mrs. S. may do the closing, alternating instruction. I could tell that Mrs. S. was a major part of the classroom by the way the students responded to her when she walked around making sure they were on task. The students were not afraid to ask Mrs. S. for help... After this period was over, Mrs. S. and I went to her next English class taught by Mrs. P. This class was a stark contrast to Mr. Sh.’s class. This was definitely in the beginning stage of co-teaching. Earlier, Mrs. S. mentioned that she played a more laid back role in Mrs. P.’s class. Through my observation, I saw that Mrs. S.’s role was reduced to an aid. The communication between Mrs. P.’s class was minimal. Mrs. S. just mentioned to Mrs. P. that I was there to observe an inclusion class. That was the extent of the communication between the two of them. Mrs. S. and I went straight to the back of the class. Mrs. P. did all of the instruction. She basically talked the whole class. When Mrs. P. tried to engage the students in the lesson only a few students answered while Mrs. S. stood by a student that I presumed may have been an inclusion, judging by his outburst and his behavior. It was as if Mrs. S. stood guard in order to keep his behavior in check while Mrs. P. taught the class.

With Mrs. S., I got to see her in two different situations: one where she was part of a team and another where her role was reduced to an aid. I definitely saw the difference between the two.

Because he watched the inclusion teacher interact with two different content area teachers, this candidate was in a unique position to think about the potential and pitfalls of teacher collaboration. His comments were specific and nuanced, and he drew attention not just to the quality of the interactions the inclusion teacher had with the two different content area teachers but also with the quality of her interactions with the different groups of students. His detailed

observations allowed him to draw subtle conclusions about the student learning that took place in both classrooms, based on the inclusion teacher's role as either full collaborator or aid.

Few candidates had as thought-provoking experiences as Nii, but the Discussion Forum, once again, allowed others to build on what Nii witnessed and described. His peers' remarks demonstrate how they were able to integrate his experience with their own. Elisa, for example, had not witnessed a strong collaborative approach. She wrote:

I like the team taught approach. As for the teachers you were with, I think it says a lot about them and how they still care. Being a "team" takes a lot of work, planning, and commitment to students and each other. The classroom I observe weekly is much like Mrs. P.'s class. The inclusion teacher sticks to his kids and basically controls their behaviors for my Mentor Teacher to teach. It's great that you were able to observe both situations. It will help you draw conclusions as to why co-teaching may or may not work and how you (as a teacher) can do things.

Similarly, Nancy drew conclusions based on Nii's experience:

That sounds like a great classroom to be in. This should be the way all inclusion classes work. The teachers and students should have no problems working together and they all should be treated equally as it seems to be in the classroom you have described. This benefits the students greatly because they know that they can go to either of the teachers for help allowing for a more effective learning experience.

Based on Nii's positive (and negative) experiences, Nancy was able to come away with a positive view of collaboration.

The ability of candidates to learn from each other's experiences was driven home by a contrasting collaborative experience described by a different candidate. This candidate wrote only of the negative elements of collaboration she had observed and condemned the use of an inclusion teacher as "a waste":

I have been able to observe a "co-teaching" classroom since the start. I place co-teaching in quotes because though there are two professionals for a single group, they do not share instruction.... The approach that closest resembles the class is that of the 'One Teach, One Observe.'

.... The GE teacher teaches all the students, he helps them equally and answers their questions, he praises them and quiets all kids down when necessary regardless if they are "his" or not. There is however a clear distinction in responsibility of the kids between both teachers. The GE teacher does not grade their work or collect their assignments, he directs the students to the SE teacher who usually sits in the back of the room with his back to the kids, not following class instruction or helping "his struggling kids".... I feel that classroom communication is guarded. Even though the teachers spend the majority of the day together, they only speak [when] necessary to each other. I have seen that they

are never on the same page and they have both expressed to me that they do not like the others methods.

I feel much fault falls on the SE teacher [emphasis added] —he does not keep up with the GE teacher.... The SE teacher demonstrates limited familiarity not only with the content but also with the accommodations the students require. Since his back is usually to the class he rarely follows the lesson. When “his” kids struggle he does not serve as a model for them—he asks them what their problem is and is quick to make negative comments and basically shut them down.

The instructional presentation is done by the GE teacher. The SE teacher is unaware of the day/weeks lesson.... In the start of my Field Experience I thought “wow, how great for these teachers to be able to work together and accommodate to needs of the students.” As the weeks passed I found co-teaching to be less productive than what it is set out to be.

This response, and particularly the laying of blame on the special education teacher, is representative of many content area teachers, and it is disturbing to see this candidate beginning to adopt the “prejudices” against what she sees as the uninformed and unhelpful special education teacher. However, Nii’s experience stands in sharp contrast to her experience, and he posted a response to her that drew out the distinction:

I see that you have experienced a bad example of what co-teaching is. As someone from the outside looking in you should not be able to tell who are GE students and who are SE students. That is definitely not what co-teaching is about. Unfortunately there are a lot of classes like that. When there is such a clear distinction between the two populations, everyone loses, especially the students.

Nii made clear to his peer that the problem was not in the idea of collaboration per se, but in the execution in the classroom she observed. Another peer made the same point:

The lack of planning and communication between the GE and SE teacher I think makes the students think the SE teacher is more of an assistant or aide. I do not think it is a waste of the second licensed/trained professional. I personally think it is a matter of being able to work as a team and actually working an equal amount. At least you were able to observe what changes can be done if you are ever in the situation to have to co-teach.

Together, both comments asked the candidate to hold off on her dismissal of co-teaching as a waste and to think about the importance of teamwork for successful collaboration. What could easily have been a negative reinforcement of stereotypical views (collaboration is a waste of resources, special education teachers have little to contribute) was reframed through the interactions and incisive commentary of peers on the Discussion Forum.

Constructive Challenges to Dispositions

Finally, and perhaps most powerfully, there were times when the candidates challenged other candidates' dispositions. In the thread below, we see one candidate calling another to task about her remarks on the predominately Hispanic population that the schools serve.

Gina: One can argue that the general student body of [the school] fails at standardized testing because it is predominantly attended by Hispanics.... Perhaps other factors influence students to not learn effectively, such as poor funding or incompetent teachers. Nevertheless, teachers seem to set high standards, but some students simply do not excel in standardized tests.

Her peer responded in a constructive but pointed way about the potential racism in Gina's remarks about "Hispanics."

Elisa: I'm not too clear about your last comment. Do you mean that the school is a failing school? That they all failed a standardized test or that Hispanics cannot pass a standardized test? I find the problem not to be about race but that standards within districts are low compared to what the state wants. Kids in school are passing their tests and then when they take the standardized tests they fail.

As discussed elsewhere, this interaction indicates the power of peer-on-peer interaction, without the intervention of a University-Based Teacher Educator. Moreover, the relative anonymity of the Discussion Forum, and the fact that each candidate can take his or her time to frame and reflect on comments in a way that is impossible during class discussion means that uncomfortable issues (such as the one above) can be handled thoughtfully, tactfully, and without distracting emotion.

Conclusion

Our study evolved out of necessity. We were aware that our Field Experience was not working and that we needed an expedient solution that did not require resources or wholesale programmatic changes but would allow candidates to get the most out of their work in the field. Also, our study was designed out of pragmatic need with the goal of utilizing technology to better serve the needs of the candidates.

The use of focused assignments in the interactive environment of the Discussion Forum using Blackboard allowed us to reach our goal of creating a more meaningful field experience that encouraged candidates to be more interdependent (with each other) and independent learners, thus creating a powerful interdependent learning community. When candidates needed help or support, their peers provided constructive comments or shared experiences on the Discussion Forum. This allowed candidates to rethink or contextualize what they thought they "saw" in the classroom, and the peer-to-peer interaction allowed them to process their experiences without intervention from their University-Based Teacher Educators. In addition, the Discussion Forum allowed candidates to share and think through the positive and negative experiences of the whole group. This process widened the range of candidates' experiences from the field observation and deepened their understanding of many issues they witnessed and will potentially face in the profession.

Our experience also suggests that this combination of technology and focused assignments can help create more assertive and independent candidates. The online platform forced candidates to be active, self-directed learners. For example, one part of the Blackboard Discussion area had been reserved for University-Based Teacher Educators' Announcements; by the end of the semester, candidates were posting "announcements" for each other. The candidates' "announcements" included informational postings such as school calendar changes and Mentor Teacher paperwork as well as pertinent articles and professional development material they thought their peers might find interesting. This action suggests that the candidates felt ownership over and empowered to contribute to the learning in the course and that they are moving one step closer along the road to becoming teachers who will be able to negotiate the school environments in which they plan careers.

Limitations

Swenson and Redmond (2009) cautioned that we have much to learn about how to use "innovative learning tools to create effective and appropriate learning experiences" (p. 9). Borko, Whitcomb, and Liston (2009) expressed a similar concern, arguing that while the educational potential of new technology is "only beginning to be reached" (p. 4), there is a gap "between development of new tools and online experiences and research efforts to examine their effectiveness" (p. 6). This case study is one such piece of research that has been advanced to allow educators to learn from our experience of using an online, interactive student-centered learning community to enhance field experience.

We knew candidates in our study needed guidance to make meaning out of and reflect deeply on their time in the field. So, we delivered structure through focused assignments and peer interaction in an online format. While we were satisfied with the results of our study, additional research could be conducted that compares two sets of candidates—one with focused assignments and an online discussion board; the other with a face-to-face class linked with the field experience course—to investigate what is lost and what is gained through this technological and pedagogical innovation.

The limitations of this study are also its strength. Alger and Kopcha (2009) described a large-scale, whole-sale revision of the student teaching experience as transformed through the possibilities of technology. However, this study was far simpler. Some of the benefits of our work lie precisely in its limitations in that it can be easily adopted and adapted for a range of institutions and programs.

AUTHOR NOTES

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