

Teacher education in the time of COVID: Recommendations for praxis

Jess Smith

Baylor University, Waco, Texas, United States

Abstract

The current health crisis has brought into relief the gap in teacher training regarding online teaching and effective online pedagogies. To address this issue moving forward, the author recommends online field experience in teacher education, effective professional development to that end for in-service teachers, and intentional work on building social connectedness in existing online classroom environments.

Keywords: field experience, online education, online pedagogy, professional development, teacher education

With the realities of coronavirus, schools around the globe have moved their learning to online systems. In the U.S. alone, 124,000 public and private schools have closed their physical campuses, which has affected at least 55.1 million students (Education Week, 2020). This shift brings with it struggles for both students and teachers. Teachers feel unprepared and overwhelmed with teaching their students online (Perper, 2020). Students, in some districts more than half of the school population, are not participating in the online learning (Goldstein, Popescu, & Hannah-Jones, 2020) and are experiencing significantly higher instances of learning loss,

perhaps up to 70% higher than a typical year (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). In light of these struggles, the time is ripe to include online teaching field experiences in teacher education programs.

Online teaching requires significantly different skills than traditional, face-to-face teaching. Online teaching pedagogies vary from in-person practices (Dixson, 2010; Martin, 2019; Draus et al., 2014; Griffiths & Graham, 2009; Korkut et al., 2015), and many contemporary teachers feel so unprepared and overwhelmed with implementing them that they feel "anxious," angry, and "extremely checked out" as a result of a lack of preparation for the realities of online teaching (Perper, 2020, para. 8). This tension carries over into student perceptions. Students similarly struggle with poorly designed online education, which can become stale and repetitive, causing students to feel isolated and disinterested without an emotional connection to course content (Martin, 2019).

One potential solution to this dissatisfaction is intentional relationship building. Building relationships positively affects student learning and can be harder in an online environment. Student-teacher relationships are the building blocks of all classroom activities (Marzano et al., 2003). For students, satisfaction with their learning experiences and feelings of social connectedness are highly correlated (Daves & Roberts, 2010). Furthermore, students whose instructors were not trained in teaching online reporting a lack of interest, a lower quality of work, and less overall satisfaction (Martin, 2019). Getting students involved in the learning creates greater gains (Griffiths & Graham, 2009). Effective online teaching consists of some intentional components, such as being explicit in course expectations, giving video tutorials, providing an outlet for students to share their lives, and asking questions and soliciting student interests (Martin, 2019). Making personalized videos for students has been shown repeatedly to aid in relationship building in online courses (Draus et al., 2014; Griffiths & Graham, 2009; Korkut et al., 2015). The most natural place for teachers to learn these skills is where they most traditionally learn skills: field experience and professional development.

Field experience and professional development are the two key ways that preservice and in-service teachers gain skills. Field experiences serves as a broad foundational form of professional development for preservice teachers and are a vital part of teacher education (Aiken & Day, 1999; Buck, Morsink, Griffin, Hines, & Lenk, 1992; Harlin, 1999; Joyce, Yarger, Howey, Harbeck, & Kluwin, 1977; Wiggins & Follo, 1999), and only 1.3% of the 522 teacher education program respondents self-reported

in an online survey that they include field experiences in virtual schools; the remaining 98.7% had no online component (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). This trend remains true even in online programs. Harrell and Harris (2006) found that the vast majority of online teacher education programs can be more accurately described as “web-supported, rather than delivered completely online” (p. 758) and still contain face-to-face student teaching field experiences. Effective training programs for online teaching see the highest gains when instructors are comfortable with the hardware involved, are trained in the course delivery system, have ongoing support from their schools and administration, and are motivated to work in the new environment (Wolf, 2006).

After entering the classroom as in-service teachers, new learning largely happens through professional development, either through the school district or sought out from a professional organization. Professional development, defined as “structured professional learning that results in changes to teacher knowledge and practices, and improvements in student learning outcomes” (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017, p. 2), is the most common method teachers use in order to gain access to new teaching strategies and might hold the key to training those teachers who are already in the field.

Another notable consideration is the future of K–12 school modalities. While some might argue that as vaccination rates rise and infection rates fall, schools will move away from online modalities in a rush back to normal, pre-coronavirus practices and environments, the fact remains that the changes in virtual schooling, remote working, and public health closures remain unlikely to materially disappear any time soon. For instance, many universities plan to continue more robust online course offerings into the next fall and spring semesters and beyond (Kreidler, 2021), and K–12 virtual options are following suit (Singer, 2021; Superville, 2020). The focus then must shift to determine how teacher education and pedagogies can move intentionally toward effective practices in light of these shifts.

With purposeful work toward shifting teaching methodologies rather than moving face-to-face classes online with no restructuring, teachers and students alike can feel more successful. With this challenge in mind, a few key changes in practice might be useful at all levels of education, from university and alternative teacher education to the teachers working with students of all ages each day.

As preservice and in-service teachers alike gain valuable experience in online modalities, an intentional path forward emerges in which experienced educators can guide novices through the demands of online teaching. The novel nature of the coronavirus school closures led to teacher educators and administrators with minimal—if any—experience teaching online training and supporting their preservice and in-service teachers in the uncharted territory of virtual schooling. One year in, the waters, while more charted, still leave much unknown. While many schools are back teaching face-to-face, many also retain virtual and hybrid options, demonstrating that schools will likely feel the impacts of these changes for years to come.

Addressing this problem retroactively is impossible, but creating new practice for moving forward is not. To that end, teacher education programs and school administrators should make moves to change teacher education in the following four ways. First, teacher education programs traditional and alternative certification alike should move to add online field experience to teacher education programs. Second, schools and education service centers should create professional development for in-service teachers on effective online teaching. Third, teachers must continue to prioritize relationships and relationship building regardless of class modality in order to meet student needs and increase student learning. Finally, educators at all levels should explore methods for building social connectedness among students and teachers using online pedagogies.

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Author bio

JESS SMITH, Ph.D., is a recent graduate of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, School of Education, at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Her major research interests lie in the areas of teacher education, student and teacher autonomy, and critical literacy. Email: jess_smith1@baylor.edu