

Practicum Observations 100 Miles Away: The Success Story of an Online Practicum

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Introduction

Have you pondered how you work smarter? After driving three hours to a practicum, with a car showing signs of transmission problems, observing a student for an hour and then returning to the college late afternoon, I finally made the determination there was a better way. A whole day was consumed for a one hour observation. Technology, technology everywhere, but here I was relying on car and time to accomplish an important aspect of my job as Teacher Educator. As universities have married into cyberspace and distant learning as the new way of defining themselves, the role of the teacher educator has been redefined as well. Varner (2007) points out that web-based instructional delivery has resulted in an explosion of technological innovations and initiatives which poses a multitude of questions pertaining to the appropriateness of delivery, the ability to meet student need and the teacher's ability to use smart classrooms. As the questions are asked, we find technology clearly serves us well in every aspect of training and educating.

Jeffery Young reports that Thomas L. Russell, director emeritus of instructional telecommunications at North Carolina State University, having analyzed 400 studies of distance education methods, hoping to find evidence for his belief that distance education was superior, found that most studies showed "no significant difference" in learning no matter what kind of media or method used. (Young, 2001) Though not superior, it is a significant statement that online delivery is as effective as onsite delivery.

The intent of this article is to look at the idea of changing Teacher Preparation programs from traditional onsite programs to distant learning programs, including the use of practicums online.

Distant Learning Programs

With colleges competing for the dwindling student supply, they are seeking ways to make degree programs and continuing education more attractive. Adding to the colleges' desire to attract students is a new population of adults who want to replace their present jobs and careers for the ranks of the classroom teachers. Teacher Preparation programs have a strong reason for distant learning but with licensure requirements these program must transform from basic read and restate to development of effective teaching skills.

Marshall University has developed its masters and doctorate programs via online delivery, some 100% online, some 80% online and some simply computer enhanced. classes. Marshall University decided to make a bold venture by expanding it use of online programs to use VISTA in support of their middle level practicum.

Distance Practicums via Online Delivery

In making such move, it was found a major benefit is the unlimited resources available to the students via the Internet, with live sites provided by the simple touch of the finger. Students are afforded one-on-one interaction with the college supervisor and can fulfill the requirements of a clinical in an environment that is comfortable to them. With use of the chat room, bulletin board forums and availability of private mail to each other, interaction is enhanced among the students by virtue of the fact such interaction is not confined to a set time in a particular classroom. Students can use the various tools of online delivery to plan, organize, work cooperatively and compare models of instruction. It is a completely constructivist approach in that the performance is directly the responsibility of the student. The college supervisor becomes a true facilitator of learning, providing individual students feedback about results and direction as to other learning. The instructor's office becomes the classroom.

The use of online practicum is a bold extension of online instruction. It is enhanced by DVD, VCR and CD taping of instruction. The college supervisors have the benefit of viewing an instructional act repeatedly. Rather than an attempt to make judgment on the proficiency of instruction during an onsite moment, the supervisor has the opportunity to support his/her judgment with the rubrics and other materials spread before them as they observe the student via video. Performance rated within online environments includes such areas as:

- Utilization of human development in the identification and remediation of classroom problems
- Using student cognitive development in determining instruction
- Utilizing group structures in implementing instruction
- Design of interdisciplinary units
- Assessing diagnostically, formatively and summatively
- Demonstrating cultural responsiveness
- Creating a positive learning environment
- Utilizing a variety of learning strategies
- Communicating with all stakeholders effectively (Danielson, 1996)

However, this system, like any other delivery model, can be a pit hole of mediocrity for teacher education if used inappropriately, as can occur with any delivery system. Oblinger and Hawkins (2006) emphasize that online courses involve content they also involve interaction, dialogue, mentoring, coaching and many other facilitations by the instructor.

Additionally, the student must be extremely self-motivated and self-disciplined. The student must have a mastery of the basic functions of the computer enabling them to use the links, do research, provide attachments and communicate. If a student fails to read the materials or do research at a pace that is consistent with the requirements of the practicum, like any other course, the student will not be able to master the pedagogical skills they are attempting to convey in the clinical experience. There is no instructor meeting them on a weekly basis to reinforce this. Students must set deadlines for themselves to meet expectation. The use of online instruction frequently means the student works in part within the environment of the home. The distractions in the home can become a functional restraint, which the focus of a regular classroom prohibits. On the same hand, the instructor must be efficient in the feedback to individual students to monitor their performance. The greatest challenge for the instructor and student is the fact that written conceptualization replaces verbal conceptualization. The written word can be interpreted so literally or so broadly that miscommunication often leads to misunderstanding. Additionally, the dynamics of non-verbal communication and the immediacy of learning moments are totally

void within online instruction. But, all of these factors can be present within a traditional approach as well.

The benefit of viewing the student's lesson plans, reflections and instruction without limits of time is far more beneficial than confining practicum observation to a one hour experience with only a few minutes for follow-up after the lesson. Online forms needed for such an experience include:

- Online Instructions for the Cooperating Teacher
- The selected Performance Assessment Tool
- Step by Step Directions for the Student
- Guidelines for the Reflective Journal
- Lesson Plan Format
- Release and College Forms
 - Student Release Form for Videotaping
 - Adult Release Form for Videotaping
 - Student Release Form for Use of Materials for Accreditation
 - Clinical Data/Stipend Form on The Cooperating Teacher
 - Performance Declaration for Licensure

Conclusions:

Obviously, based on the merits that Distance Learning delivery systems are as effective as traditional approaches to teacher preparation, the advantage of attracting a new population of students supports the momentum in creating these new ways of delivering training. However, as we rush down the cyberspace highway, we must not forget the basic principles of learning and remember that we all have different learning styles with different primary modalities to learn and we bring to the classroom a myriad of different personalities. New delivery systems may fit certain learners but it might not others. Distance Learning may be a phenomenon of the present and the future but it must not become a bandwagon effect in which many outstanding teachers are eliminated from the classroom because they don't learn effectively outside a traditional approach.

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