



Feature Article

Maintaining Fidelity in Teacher Education Programs During COVID-19

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Abstract

Three teacher education professors describe their respective professional experiences surrounding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each detail how their professional experience and foci led them to make changes to best serve the students at their institution. This article intends to serve teacher educators by striking a balance between theory and practical application while candidly addressing successes and areas for improvement.

Teacher education programs across the country have been pressed to adapt and implement emergency plans of action. The Citadel is unique because it is a military college that also has a variety of graduate programs across campus. At the time of this writing, we have approximately 3500 students in total. At The Citadel, applying emergency protocols, predominantly in reaction to natural disasters, has become almost customary in recent years – given our location in Charleston, South Carolina. That being said, implementation of such strategies for acute weather conditions has proven drastically different than having to consider all of the facets and uncertainties of trying to effectively prepare our candidates in the face of the seemingly chronic existence of COVID-19.

The purpose of this essay, told from the perspectives and experiences of three teacher

education professors (See Table 1), is to detail our individual, professional foci and the strategies each of us employed, all in an effort to maintain and strengthen the integrity and fidelity of our teacher education program.

Fidelity of Instruction

This first narrative comes from Christopher Dague. Christopher is an assistant professor of teacher and social studies education at The Citadel, where he has worked for three years. Prior to coming to The Citadel, Christopher worked as a high school history teacher and head baseball coach in North Carolina.

Pivoting our instructional habits as a result of the ramifications of COVID-19 caused an immediate quick-acting review of our instructional design. Face-to-face instruction was nullified due to the pandemic, and a shift toward online teaching caused many concerns for each of us. One of the

Table 1: *Professional Experience and Focus of Teacher Education Faculty*

Faculty Member, Rank, and Experience	K-12 Experience	Professional Foci
Christopher Dague, Assistant Professor, 3 years	Teacher, 13 years, Public High School	Fidelity of Instruction Planning, Communication, and Relationship-Building
SooJoung Kim, Visiting Assistant Professor, 4 years	Teacher, 4 years, Public Middle School	Fidelity of Remote Learning Student Connection, Student Participation, and Engaging Module Design
Tammy Graham, Professor, 13 years	Teacher, Educational Diagnostician, Special Education Coordinator, 17 years, Public Elementary, Middle, and High Schools	Fidelity of Clinical Experiences Adaptability, Teamwork, and Guidelines

critical challenges was finding methods by which to make instructional activities meaningful and worthy of students' time. Our significant years of experience in the classroom – both K-12 and in higher education – allowed us to better leverage our new instructional reality.

Prior to coming to our institution, I served as a high school history teacher and head baseball coach for thirteen years in North Carolina. I begin with this because it speaks to how I still see myself professionally – as a teacher. Instead of teaching the finer points of the French Revolution, I now support candidates' understandings of student motivation and classroom management as well as contemporary approaches to teaching social studies. Regardless of the change in content and professional title, at the very front of my mind is always the betterment of my students – now and for their future professional endeavors.

When it became apparent that hybrid or remote learning was a possibility due to COVID-19, my focus turned to ensuring that my students would not lose out on vital information. With the help of

colleagues, I took up the challenge to make sure that my students would not miss a step, irrespective of circumstances. During the spring semester I was teaching two courses – one a comprehensive methods course and the other a social studies methods course (both graduate courses). Additionally, I served as a content supervisor for our social studies student teachers.

With over a decade of classroom experience, and as someone who researches the intersections of motivational theory and instructional practices, I felt confident that I could provide beneficial experiences to my students – even if in a remote fashion. My initial confidence was somewhat thwarted when I realized that I would need to rely on technology with which I had limited, or no, exposure. Moreover, my greatest concern was maintaining the connections and personal relationships which had led to many positive experiences in previous face-to-face class meetings. After much consideration, I realized that in order to maintain the expectations that were previously developed, I needed to focus on three facets of the teaching and learning process that could transcend barriers placed on my classes and students, 1). Intentional planning, 2). Clear communication, and 3). Genuine relationship-building.

Intentional Planning

In evaluating potential issues within my courses, I first looked at my courses' infrastructure. I recognized that students' familiarity with the 'interactive notebook (INB)' I created at the beginning of the semester could provide students with a discernible advantage in navigating subsequent weeks. The INB, operated through a cloud-based system, housed all student work, and contained the majority of resources (i.e. links, scholarship, etc.) students would need to complete tasks and assessments. Students also utilized the INB to submit assignments. Feeling secure about the infrastructure, I began to amend the course schedule – based in part on the Carroll Model of School Learning (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: *The Carroll (1963) Model of School Learning*

After completing my initial evaluation and creating tentative adjustments, the next step tasked me with asking students directly about their needs. Inquiring about students' needs was necessary to allow for students to experience agency in their own education. With such agency in the decision-making process, I was attempting to serve their needs while also modeling the sheer importance of supporting students' autonomy – a lesson I hope they will take with them professionally moving forward (Stefanou et al., 2004).

In our initial video conference, I made my recommendations and explained how such amendments might impact them. After intently listening to students' questions and concerns, the one thing I realized in my post-conference reflection was that I simply could not afford to deviate from my pedagogical philosophy. Students' work must maintain its rigor and challenge without simply increasing in the number of assignments and materials. The students and I agreed that quantity would not serve as an adequate substitute for quality. In fact, I took out several assignments while I consolidated others. I felt better about holding to my conviction when one of my social studies methods students wrote, "when everything went online this semester and my other classes were all messy trying to figure out the school operating platforms, this class was seamless. Honestly when all my other classes became more complicated...this one maintained its integrity" Based on this and other evaluations,

I feel confidently that intentional planning coupled with allowing students to share their voice and assert their agency proved valuable.

Clear Communication and Genuine Relationships

I made it a point to make sure that the exchange that routinely occurred between students and me did not solely focus on content and assignments. Communicating and developing a clearer understanding of students' personal lives during such unsettling times was critical to maintaining the fidelity of the courses. Over the course of the remaining eight weeks of the semester, my students and I met weekly via video conference. While each class session was not as long as it would have been in our original format (i.e. face-to-face), usually lasting less than two hours, it was key for students to know that our time together was still important. While some sessions bore more fruit than others, our remote class sessions served as an opportunity to make sure that we were all in lockstep relative to scheduling and pacing as well as expectations. At times, for me at least, it brought a sense of normalcy and purpose. With so much uncertainty surrounding us all, the class sessions served as temporary relief from the chaos.

Of course, after a few weeks of remote learning, it became apparent that students' response rate to email was slowing down dramatically. As a result, I knew I had to be more strategic with my communications via email or our learning management system (LMS). In some cases, I would simply set up a telephone conference call with individual students to try and create an even more personal touch to our learning experience. On a fixed-interval schedule of sorts, I would reach out to specific students weekly in an effort to check-in and maintain students' sense of relatedness to the course and to me.

This leads to my final focus – maintaining teacher-student relationships. The magnitude of building positive teacher-student relationships in learning environments is evident – not only in the literature (see Davis & Dague, 2020; Maulana et

al., 2013; Newberry, 2010) but as experienced in my own professional life. While the importance of teacher-student relationships is evident, our interactions became even more critical with the increasing physical disconnect. For me, modeling the vitality of such relationships began by focusing on the messages I was delivering to my students. Because I did not know all of the details of students' personal lives, I had to try to naturally re-cultivate connections with my students (Wubbels et al., 1997). We know that when teachers or professors "respond to students in ways that are responsive to student needs, are emotionally warm, and provide for student autonomy, students tend not only to feel more motivated in the classroom, but also to achieve at higher rates" (Davis & Dague, 2020, p. 153).

Now more than ever it was imperative that students witnessed my responsiveness to their respective needs. While I would like to say that every student was able to see the process through, I did have some students who really struggled to create a work-home life balance – so much so that one of my students did stop showing up for our weekly class sessions and failed to turn in the prescribed assignments. Despite not having a 100% 'success rate,' I am proud of the work that was accomplished in spite of the challenging conditions that so many of my students were facing.

Not only was maintaining fidelity of instruction of the utmost importance in our teacher education programs, an additional area of concern as we faced new pandemic regulations was ensuring fidelity of online learning for students. When courses that were traditionally taught in a face-to-face or hybrid format moved completely online, we aspired to help students learn as much in the online environment as they would have learned in the more traditional classroom environments.

Fidelity of Remote Learning

The second narrative comes from Soojoung Kim. Soojoung is a visiting assistant professor of teacher

and literacy education at The Citadel, where she has worked for four years. Prior to coming to The Citadel, Soojoung worked as a middle school teacher in Seoul, Korea.

With the sudden shift of teaching methods from in-person to online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my colleagues and I had to readjust quickly to help students succeed. In my role as a visiting assistant professor, I teach foundational education courses that introduce the American education system and learners' development. I emphasize fundamental knowledge and also focus on the growth of my students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision making as preservice teachers. As students learn best when they actively participate in their learning (Bloom, 1984; Chickering & Gamson, 1987), I use cooperative learning strategies, hands-on activities, pair or group discussions, and a group project to promote their higher-level thinking and professional disposition.

When I heard about the change of situation due to COVID-19, I had one thing on my mind – how to maintain the continuity of instruction. Since students who succeeded in face-to-face courses might not be as successful in online courses (Cheung & Kan, 2002; Tucker, 2001), I needed to consider practical ways to help my students effectively adapt to a new situation. It is challenging to convert a face-to-face course into an online format because developing an online course requires careful planning and specific training (Khan et al., 2017). I had experience teaching online, so I felt confident in changing my courses to online versions. To have a smooth transition and to keep the integrity and fidelity of my courses, I considered two aspects, keeping a connection with students to encourage participation and designing practical modules for balanced work.

Connection with Students to Encourage Participation

Being connected with students encouraged students' participation. Students were more actively involved in their activities when they

interacted with their classmates and me online. I provided three individual conferences or group meetings at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of semester during my previous online courses. These meetings were different from virtual office hours. Students gave positive feedback stating that they enjoyed their discussion posts more when they met with their classmates and me. Interactions create a sense of community for participation and assist each student's learning while discussing their ideas (Lowenthal et al., 2017; Poll et al., 2014).

I blended both asynchronous and synchronous formats to create interactive discussions using different tools such as online discussion threads and real-time video conferencing. Advantages of the asynchronous format are more flexibility for students and more reflective and thoughtful responses from students, while the pros of synchronous discussion are greater spontaneity and more social interaction (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010). I wanted to take full advantage of both formats. First, I created an asynchronous discussion board and asked students to write a post and two responses of classmates' thoughts. Then, I offered a once-a-week real-time synchronous meetings during the regular class hour, since live-conferencing assists students in their learning during the synchronous sessions and also helps them enjoy their asynchronous activities (Lowenthal et al., 2017). During weekly meetings, students summarized their discussions and reflected on their thoughts. Most students reported that they enjoyed both formats. However, one student complained about too much writing, and another student commented on the repetition during both discussions. For my future online courses, I will utilize cooperative learning activities, 'Think-Pair-Share' or 'Jigsaw,' by using a particular group allocating function, Breakout Rooms, that allows an instructor to assign each student to a pair or a group and allocate the pairs or groups to different rooms (Peachey, 2017). After a short discussion in each group's room, students can come back to share

their thoughts as a whole group.

Individual interaction was helpful to students who were struggling. One student who did well before COVID-19 did not participate in online activities. Two other students stopped coming to the weekly meetings. I contacted them to offer assistance because an instructor's concern can help troubled students overcome rough times and help them continue completing work (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). While some students reported that their troubles were related to technical difficulties, sickness, and family business, one of them honestly expressed his laziness and procrastination. After providing individual contact, these students showed some effort to make-up incomplete work.

Effective Module Design

Designing active modules for students' learning is critical to creating a successful online course. Students were going through a stressful situation, and in order to adjust into the new online learning situation, I did not want to over-burden my students with additional assignments. As such, I tried to keep the workload reasonable. I also did not want my students to become lazy or procrastinate, so I tried to design practical modules by changing some assignments and assessments.

I changed the format and length of objective quizzes. Instead of taking lengthy quarterly written quizzes (40-50 questions), students took quick weekly online quizzes (10 questions). I intended to check students' learning more often in a less inundating manner. I gave them three attempts if they were not satisfied with their previous grades. Students recounted a fondness of the short online quizzes and an appreciation for several opportunities to complete quizzes. This aligns with the findings of several studies. Students prefer online multiple-choice tests to paper-and-pencil quizzes because they spend less time taking a quiz and receive feedback faster (Segall et al., 2005). Retaking quizzes until satisfactory scores are achieved can help students

improve their learning (Rice, 2003) and increase students' motivation to learn (Nicol, 2007).

I adjusted class activities and projects because teachers need to consider their students' diverse situations when they prepare online lessons (Darby, 2020). Since writing takes more time than just speaking to some students, I reduced the number of topics in asynchronous discussion. I changed the grouping and technology options for group projects because some students are tech-savvy and well-equipped with high-performance devices, while others do not have the same access or skills (Darby, 2020). Another alteration of activities was students' field experiences. Since the closure of public schools, students could not have onsite visits. Instead, students watched pre-recorded teaching videos, interviewed teachers and students on virtual platforms, and joined the virtual classrooms offered by local schools.

As an instructor of foundational education courses in higher education, I focused on continuity of instruction in this sudden instructional mode shift due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To maintain my courses' fidelity and integrity, I considered two things. I actively interacted with my students to promote students' virtual participation and designed practical modules to facilitate students' balanced work. Although there were some challenges, most students responded positively to the changes and demonstrated a mastery of course learning outcomes and goals.

While maintaining fidelity of instruction and learning was imperative as we faced pandemic-related restrictions on campus, they were not the only areas that had to be considered. Each teacher education course at our institution has multiple hours of field experience requirements. We ensure that our students visit rural, urban, and suburban schools during their time in the program. During their final semester, our students complete an internship for a minimum of 60 full days. As such, we quickly had to devise a plan for maintaining fidelity of clinical

experiences.

Fidelity of Clinical Experiences

This third and final narrative comes from Tammy Graham. Tammy is a professor of teacher and special education at The Citadel, where she has worked for thirteen years. Prior to coming to The Citadel, Tammy worked as a teacher, educational diagnostician and special education coordinator.

Being in the field of education for 30 years, I have seen many trends and many challenges. Admittedly I have never experienced anything like our current pandemic. While serving as an associate professor and coordinator of our teacher education division, I found myself utilizing strategies that I learned early in my career as an educator: being adaptable and working as a member of a team, following guidelines while being mindful of creating meaningful experiences for students, and sharing information with stakeholders.

Adaptability and Teamwork

While we adjusted to this "new normal," I communicated often with my dean, the Director of Field Experiences and Internships, and other teacher education faculty members to determine needs and to brainstorm relevant ideas for meeting these needs. It was very important to consider the stress that other teacher education faculty members might be experiencing, but it was also important to share leadership responsibilities with capable team members to ensure trust and motivation (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

One area of concern for my colleagues and me was field experiences; undergraduate and graduate students expressed concern as well. How could students complete their required field experience hours when schools were participating in distance learning? To assist with professor and student anxiety, it was determined that a staff member with K-12 teaching experience would be responsible for researching and vetting virtual field experience opportunities, thus lessening the stress for everyone involved.

Another area of apprehension for professors and students that required flexibility and teamwork was student-teaching internships. Internship candidates are expected to complete a minimum of 60 full days of internship. Would that even be possible when schools were participating in virtual learning, and if so, how could interns teach their students and assist their cooperating teachers? How could they be effectively evaluated by college supervisors and cooperating teachers? It was determined that the Director of Field Experiences and Internships, with support and input from me, would draft a plan for completion.

Effectively completing field experiences and student-teaching internships would not have been possible for our students if we had refused to adapt to the situation and work together as a team. While it was necessary for us to be flexible and work together, we also realized the importance of modeling these traits for future educators. We want our students to be flexible team members when they are teachers, as adaptability has been related to resiliency, well-being, and organizational commitment of teachers (Collie & Martin, 2017), as well as teacher effectiveness (Collie & Martin, 2016)

Guidelines and Integrity

In addition to increasing our adaptability, it was imperative that our programs continued to meet all requirements from our state department of education, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), the various Specialty Program Associations (SPAs), and our institution. It was equally important that our students had the opportunity to complete meaningful experiences that facilitated learning and reflection.

Staying informed of any state regulation changes for testing requirements, field experience hours, and internship guidelines was non-negotiable. While the state department of education graciously allowed quality virtual field experiences, ensuring our students completed the required number of field experience hours while also having meaningful experiences was challenging.

Some students observed the real-time virtual classrooms of teachers to whom they were previously assigned; however, that was not an option for all students. Those who were unable to participate in real-time experiences participated in the virtual videos that were vetted by our staff member. The staff member checked with each professor to see what types of experiences were relevant to his or her course, searched meaningful experiences meeting the professors' criteria, matched the experiences to indicators in our state's assessment rubric, organized the experiences by subject area and grade level, and listed the approximate length of each video. Students were provided the opportunity to reflect on their experiences via video sessions, online discussion boards, and field experience presentations or narratives.

Ensuring our student-teaching interns received a relevant internship experience was also a challenge. Thankfully, the internship candidates had opportunities to deliver face-to-face instruction before the pandemic. Once all schools went to distance learning, I communicated with the Director of Field Experiences and Internships on an almost daily basis as she drafted the previously mentioned plan for interns while we waited for guidance from our state department of education. Once we received instructions from the state, we compared the draft plan to state guidelines to see if changes were needed. Finding no areas of needed revision, we proceeded with the plan.

Interns adhered to state requirements by following the same schedules and protocol as their cooperating teachers. This experience was unique for each intern, with guidelines depending on their assigned school and school district. Candidates assisted teachers as they planned online lessons, prepared video-taped lessons, created and administered appropriate activities and assessments, checked enrollment, and provided feedback to students. Weekly internship seminars hosted by the Director of Field Experiences and Internships were moved to a

virtual format. While the seminars provided extra pedagogical, planning, and management support to interns, the interns also had the opportunity to discuss any concerns about their virtual teaching experiences. Cooperating teachers and college supervisors worked together to effectively rate intern lessons and provide valuable feedback.

While I realize there is always room for improvement, when anecdotally rating our field experiences and internships, I am comfortable that we provided the best experiences possible at the time by following state, accreditation, and institutional guidelines while being mindful of providing experiences from which the students could learn and apply to their future careers.

Stakeholder Support

During a crisis it is essential to communicate effectively and regularly with all stakeholders (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Arranging the numerous changes for field experiences and internships was crucial, and it was also important to communicate these changes to students, faculty, and school partners. Not only did we need to provide support to students enrolled in our courses and interns placed in local schools, it was also necessary to share the information with cooperating teachers and educators who paired with us for dual credit courses.

When thinking through the changes, we realized everyone was likely to become overwhelmed if receiving multiple emails from different people. As such, a thoughtful process was employed. Professors shared altered field experience guidelines with their students, while the Director of Field Experiences and Internships communicated internship changes to student-teaching interns and their cooperating teachers and college supervisors. The professor partner for dual credit courses shared field experience information with partnering high school teachers, to ensure high school students participating in these courses had the same opportunities as our college students and to hopefully help lessen the stress level of the

teachers. While multiple people were involved in the planning process, a purposeful select few participated in the communication process.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to teacher education programs at institutions of higher education (IHEs). In this situation and in all others, it is essential that we employ adaptability and teamwork while following regulations, maintaining the integrity of our programs, and providing support to our stakeholders.

Conclusion

Did every plan we implemented work? Of course not. While we recognize there is always more that could have been done, we are pleased with how we responded and worked together to best support our students in such an incredible time of crisis. In reading the words that detail our experiences, there is an evident theme – we put the needs of our students at the very front of decision making. This speaks volumes to exactly what teachers and teacher educators do daily – they put their students first. In part, our hope is that our ‘student-first mentality’ was modeled effectively enough that our candidates will carry that torch in their future classrooms. Based on our experiences in this new instructional reality, there are several aspects of the teaching-and-learning process that we will carry with us moving forward.

- *Be both systematic and flexible in course planning:* Just as we would teach our candidates to plan and even over plan for their future classes, we found it was even more important to do so in these unsettling times. Additionally, it was imperative to create avenues for flexibility when students demonstrated a need. With this in mind, we recommend that teacher educators rely on the cornerstones of effective planning – to include “the nature of the subject matter, the learners, the context, and the teacher’s role” (Darling-Hammond et al, 2005, p. 184).
- *Focus on the whole student:* As we would teach candidates to consider all of the

needs of their learners, we recommend that teacher educators focus even more intently on student engagement. In higher education, it is easy to fall into a pattern of being over reliant of direct instruction and lecturing. While the 'sage on the stage' might prove efficient when covering content, we also know that the "banking model" described by Freire (2009) can impede student participation and engagement. Thus, utilizing more authentic, student-centered practices can promote "students' sense of intellectual control" (Davis, 2003, p. 213).

- *Be an effective team member:* During a crisis, it is ineffective for one person to micromanage and try to have an answer to all problems without seeking assistance. It is time for teamwork, thinking "outside of the box," and delegation. While a leader may initially identify major problems and priorities, it is important for him or her to then delegate and share leadership responsibilities with capable team members (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). As such, it is imperative that everyone be willing to be an effective member of the team to benefit the whole.



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