

Practicum During the Pandemic: Zooming In

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Abstract

Universities in British Columbia pivoted to remote online learning in March 2020 and remained online in the upcoming school year. Teacher Education Programs also pivoted to remote online learning, with exception to practicum. Teacher candidates returned to K-12 schools for practicum as of the Fall 2020 term while coursework at universities remained online. Teacher candidates were placed into schools in their home communities, if possible, for practicum. At one university, some teacher candidates were supervised and formally observed and supported by the practicum mentor remotely due to limited staffing, location of placement, and COVID safety protocols. Formal observations and pre- and post-conferences with the teacher candidate were conducted using video conferencing on Zoom. Normally, remote observations are not accepted by the regulating board but during the COVID-19 pandemic some exceptions were made. There were some advantages and disadvantages to remote observations.

Keywords: teacher education, practicum, formal observations, remote learning, COVID-19



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Introduction

Universities in British Columbia (BC) pivoted to emergency remote learning in March 2020 and courses remained online in the upcoming school year. Teacher Education Programs (TEPs) in BC also delivered coursework online in compliance to university directives. TEPs were also at the mercy of BC K-12 Restart Plan (Ministry of Education, 2020) and BC Teacher Education Programs Approval Standards (TEPAS) governed by the BC Teachers' Council (BCTC, 2022)

K-12 schools in BC were transitioning back to in person for the 2020-2021 school year with explicit safety measures and learning group guidelines as part of Stage 2 of the Restart Plan (Ministry of Education, 2020), whereas universities continued with remote learning and online delivery. The BC Teachers' Council (BCTC) acknowledged the direction of K-12 schools and BC universities but stressed the importance of in person field experiences for teacher candidates (J. Iker, personal communication, August 25, 2020; BCTC, 2020).

A letter was sent to BC TEPs confirming and the TEP Working Group (TEPWG) would continue discussions with the Ministry of Education regarding Stage 2 implementation for the 2020-2021 school year and TEPs could take any necessary variations in field experiences this year without consequences to the teacher candidate and program approval in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (J. Iker, personal communication, August 25, 2020). In the end, teacher candidates must be able to demonstrate the Professional Standards for BC Educators during practicum (BCTC, 2019).

At one BC university, 3 to 5 teacher candidates were observed during the short and long practicum by video conferencing using Zoom. Typically, teacher candidates are supervised by a coaching teacher (i.e., classroom teacher) and practicum mentor (i.e., a faculty member or seconded K-12 educator) in person (BCTC, 2022). In 2020-2021, this TEP opted to implement remote observations for a few teacher candidates placed in small or remote communities.

Normally, decisions to make any changes to a program in any TEP are done with the entire cohort in mind and subject to approval by the BCTC (BCTC, 2022). However, in this case, an exception was made due to extenuating circumstances involving COVID-19 safety protocols, the continuance of remote learning and online course delivery at the university, the BC K-12 Restart Plan (2020), and practicum placements in the teacher candidate's hometown. This program evaluation discusses the factors that led to implementing remote observations for the practicum mentor during practicum, what was observed for technology use, and perceived advantages and disadvantages. This TEP returned to in person observations in 2021-2022.

Setting the Context

The author of this program evaluation was the course instructor for both the short and long practicum experiences, the B.Ed. Coordinator, and practicum mentor of the teacher candidates who participated in remote observations at this university and TEP. There were several pivots to programming and pedagogy in the winter and summer terms of the program when the pandemic was announced by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, the start of spring break for K-12 schools on March 13, 2020, and announcement from the university president of emergency remote learning on March 17, 2020 (G. Payne, personal communication, March 17, 2020; University of Northern British Columbia, 2022).

By March 18, 2020, the Province of British Columbia declares a state of emergency (Province of British Columbia, 2020). At the time, the focus for this TEP was to ensure that teacher candidates currently completing the long practicum (i.e., 10 weeks) had demonstrated the Professional Standards (BCTC, 2019) adequately to achieve certification. All other courses within the TEP went online. To conflate the situation, this TEP was about to implement a renewed curriculum in the fall, transitioning from a 2-year program to a continuous 16-month program that embraced a signature pedagogy involving people, place, and land.

For the 2020-2021 school year, this TEP implemented both the 2-year and 16-month programs concurrently. This program evaluation focuses on the short and long practicum experiences of the 2-year program and the implementation of remote observations via Zoom. To exacerbate the situation further, the university offered an early retirement incentive plan the year previous, which resulted in the faculty teaching in the regional program to retire after one year of the 2-year program. Due to remote learning, the regional teacher candidates joined the main campus program as one amalgamated cohort. The practicum courses were taught remotely and online.

Other challenges this TEP wrestled with during the 2020-2021 school year was the continuance of emergency remote learning, lack of faculty to accommodate the regional cohort, finding enough practicum mentors in the community to supervise the teacher candidates, maintaining relationships with teacher candidates as the program transitioned from in person to online, and rebuilding relationships with regional teacher candidates after the departure of regional faculty. In the end, 3 teacher candidates from the regional program and 5 teacher candidates from the regional and main campus programs participated in remote observations for practicum mentor supervision during the short and long practicums in the fall and winter terms respectively.

Implementation

Practicum experiences held during the pandemic were exceptional and extraordinary. Safety protocols, community outbreaks, and changing policies within K-12 school system provided many challenges for TEPs to provide quality programming for teacher candidates. All TEPs in BC placed teacher candidates in community for practicum. It was challenging to place teacher candidates for practicum and find practicum mentors in the community who were willing to supervise them. At this TEP, some educators were seconded from the local school district to be practicum mentors, and some were willing to travel. Because this TEP was unable to find enough practicum mentors for both practicums, the author of this paper also served as a practicum mentor to supervise a few teacher candidates remotely.

The teacher candidates being supervised and observed remotely were placed in school districts of rural or remote communities or small towns in Northern BC, the teacher candidate was the only one placed in that community, and the search for a practicum mentor was unsuccessful. In one of these communities, visitors from outside of that community were not allowed to visit. The notion of observing teacher candidates remotely was first proposed to the Chair of the program and Interim Dean at the beginning of the fall 2020 term. Upon approval, the Interim Dean wrote a letter in consultation with the university Health and Safety Officer, Program Manager, Practicum Placement Coordinator, and B.Ed. Coordinator (i.e., the author of this paper).

The letter (W. Owen, personal communication, November 12, 2020) informed families of the teacher education program, practicum experience, and remote observations for some teacher candidates. The letter also reassured families that the video conference was not recorded, and

no data was being stored. The remote observation by the practicum mentor was Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) compliant. Before the start of the short and long practicum, the coaching teacher distributed the letter to families. The practicum mentor also consulted with the coaching teacher before moving forward with remote observations. The coaching teacher was instrumental to the implementation of remote observations, operating the camera, and liaising with families.

Technology Use

In the classroom, coaching teachers and teacher candidates used technology in a variety of ways to achieve the remote observation via video conferencing using Zoom. Some coaching teachers would have Zoom set up on their laptop computer and had the camera facing the teacher candidate during the formal observation. The camera was stationary, and sound varied depending on the direction the teacher candidate was facing or level of student engagement. One coaching teacher had three cameras set up in the classroom for different perspectives, whereas another coaching teacher had the camera hidden and fixed on their desk so that no students would suspect that anything different or special was happening during the lesson.

Some coaching teachers facilitated the remote observation with the camera in motion. One coaching teacher had an iPad routine, so they opted to circulate the classroom with the iPad in their hand while the teacher candidate was teaching. The camera was generally focused on the teacher candidate and sometimes on the class to observe student behavior during the lesson. These students did not suspect any unusual technology use from the coaching teacher during this lesson. On the other hand, some coaching teachers were explicit about the technology with students and moved around in the room, interviewed students, and looked at student work.

The coaching teacher had autonomy and agency as to how the video conferencing would work in the classroom in consultation with the teacher candidate during the remote observations. The remote observation was generally moderated by the coaching teacher with the tech support and experience of the teacher candidate. In one instance, the education assistant held the camera and in another instance a teacher candidate spoke to and introduced “the camera” to the class. The practicum mentor had opportunities to say hello to the class or remained anonymous, silent, and invisible. The quality of the remote observation was dependent on the coaching teacher’s competence in technology use, the nature of the class and grade level, and Wi-Fi.

Video conferencing was not limited to remote observations. Zoom, the digital platform chosen, was also used for pre- and post-conferences for formal observations with the teacher candidate and practicum mentor; for formal triad conferences pre- and post-practicum with the teacher candidate, coaching teacher, and practicum mentor; and for any additional meetings with the teacher candidate and/or coaching teacher with the practicum mentor. Video conferencing via Zoom provided synchronous teaching and learning opportunities within the formal triad. Email and university LMS provided asynchronous connections for ongoing support and feedback.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Remote learning and observations are not the desired means of facilitating teacher education programs (TEPs) or field experiences (i.e., practicum) (BCTC, 2022). The BCTC and TEP Working Group provided some flexibility during the 2020-2021 school year due the pandemic to

make any necessary changes to practicum and TEP, if needed. This TEP at one BC university opted to implement remote observations for a few teacher candidates.

The advantages of video conferencing via Zoom during short and long practicum are as follows:

- Respectful to COVID-19 mandates (i.e., no visitors allowed in community);
- A viable means to access teacher candidates placed in remote or rural communities;
- Cost effective; no travel and accommodations required for the practicum mentor;
- Safe; no extensive travel during the winter months especially if driving to communities;
- Able to collaborate with coaching teacher; no additional training required for technology;
- More connection with the teacher candidate during pre- and post-conferences;
- Observe teaching (and student learning) from different perspectives in the classroom; and
- Meetings with the practicum mentor and coaching teacher/candidate were intentional.

The disadvantages of remote observations during short and long practicum are as follows:

- Poor or no access to WIFI (i.e., dropped calls or cannot observe lessons taught outside);
- Unable to see (or hear) the teacher candidate or student participation (i.e., blind spots);
- Distracted students when technology was visible, introduced, or announced to the class;
- Coaching teacher's comfort with technology (i.e., philosophically or tech experience);
- Online development of relationships may not have been fully developed as in person;
- No informal observations or regular drop-in visits (i.e., in-person, see classroom, etc.);
- The coaching teacher is present in the classroom during the formal observation; and
- The practicum mentor never met the coaching teacher or teacher candidate in person.

Closing Remarks

Varied implementations of technology use and willingness to adapt due to the pandemic on part of the coaching teacher and teacher candidate made the implementation of remote observations during the 2020-2021 school year by the practicum mentor via Zoom possible and successful. This program evaluation looked at the viability of remote observations during the short and long practicums as one response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The practicum mentor was able to observe the professional standards demonstrated by the teacher candidate with conferencing with the support of the coaching teacher. Remote observations can be one way for teacher education programs to observe teacher candidates during practicum in small communities.

Author's Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: the program evaluation, program implementation and observations, interpretation of the results, and manuscript preparation.

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Ethics Statement

Ethics review was not applicable because this article is a program evaluation focused on improving practice and program.

Conflict of Interest

The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article because no new data were created or analyzed.

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