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Pandemic Problems for Pre-Service Teacher's Practicums ... Solved

The Problem: The Pandemic

Imagine, if you will, a world where you are a graduate instructor of mathematics education. You have two classes full of pre-service teachers (PSTs) hungry to learn the content and methods of elementary mathematics. These PSTs have a practicum twice a week where they practice their skills under the guidance of a teacher, and each week we discuss their experiences. At the apex of the semester, a family math night at a local elementary school showcases the PSTs talents to students and parents alike. The semester is a great success, and everyone cheers... until 2020 happened to this graduate instructor.

Let's call it the collective Pandemic Conundrum, and I find I am unable to replicate much of these experiences with this cohort of PSTs. Practicums are on pause, math family nights are cancelled, and many students are learning at home. I am teaching in a hyflex environment (Beatty, 2007) with a mask on, and while I can teach the content and methods, the lack of experiences leaves me with a hole in the middle of my course.

However, I did not allow such a hole or a lack of experiences to prevail this semester. I coordinated with my superiors to discuss a way to provide our PSTs with some "hands on" teachings, as I felt some sort of experience is better than no experience. Thus, my idea came to fruition, and a fun, unique experience was born.

The Idea: Online After-School Tutoring

The idea I presented was online after-school tutoring via Zoom. As simplistic as it sounds, the hurdles started to mount: Where would we find the students? Would there be enough students? How would we fit this into our PSTs schedule? Would the PSTs be open to this extra task? How would I organize the sessions?

As more questions started to arise, I started to question my own idea at adding this non-required course component. Fortunately, a departmental meeting with the faculty occurred around the same time. My idea of online tutoring was well received, leaving me the only choice to proceed forward! I felt these PSTs NEED to learn and master the art of teaching and instructing in an online environment.

It was decided the online tutoring would occur during my class time. Since my classes ran from 1pm to 4pm the same day each week, with one section on Tuesdays and the other on Wednesdays, I could reserve the last hour for this experience. My class time would not interfere with the PSTs schedule since they were required to attend my class, even if it was online. I decided to dedicate three weeks for tutoring to not overwhelm the PSTs while I could stay on pace with the curriculum.

To recruit elementary students, we queried our university college faculty and their colleagues to recruit elementary aged students. Ultimately, we found five enthusiastic students to participate. Those five students I would have to divide amongst 57 PSTs in all.

The Challenge: Making it Work, and Work Well.

As it turns out, five students were more than enough, as some of my PSTs were hesitant to take on this task with their current course loads. I provided my PSTs with the option to tutor one, two, or all three weeks. This allowance helped spread out the levels of interest. I wanted to ensure there was one PST dedicated all three weeks to the student for consistency.

Once this was established, it came down to 1) how to organize the sessions and 2) how to provide guidance for my PSTs to tutor and engage these students online. Figure 1 shows an example of how I took five PSTs and divided them among one student over three weeks. When

my PSTs would log in, they put the number of their assigned student in front of their name, as this would allow me to quickly move everyone to corresponding breakout rooms via Zoom.

Figure 1

Sample chart of dividing five PSTs amongst one student over a three-week period.

Student	Spot 1	Spot 2	Spot 3
Week 1	PST 1	PST 2	PST 3
Week 2	PST 1	PST 2	PST 4
Week 3	PST 1	PST 2	PST 5

The Demo: Forging a Path into the Unknown.

To provide guidance on how to tutor elementary students online via Zoom, I considered the concept of vicarious experiences from Bandura (1994). After the announcement of three weeks of tutoring and the PSTs inquiry on how this could be done, I spent an evening contacting friends and neighbors and asked to record a short tutoring session with their elementary aged children. I underestimated the willingness of parents, and after five short sessions with various aged elementary students, I had enough demonstrations of recordings to provide to my PSTs.

Initial observations noted in these practice interventions included:

- using virtual high fives and fist bumps for positive reinforcement.
- wait time is essential.
- having a dry erase board handy was useful.
- time goes by fast, so having more planned out.
- have the share screen feature enabled from the start.

We had one week prior to the PSTs tutoring, giving time to observe my recordings and discuss what they noticed about each session.

The Main Event: Online Tutoring Engaged

The day arrived and my first set of fifteen PSTs sat ready to tutor. Everyone showed up, put the corresponding numbers in front of their names, and away they went to breakout rooms. Like an expectant parent, I did my best to wait patiently and then moved to see each room's observations.

Once I jumped into the breakout rooms, I observed diverse learning experiences for the diverse age group of students. One group used an online game of fractions for upper elementary, while other group used online manipulatives, such as base ten blocks and coins, for lower elementary.

The PSTs used many teaching strategies from class. Wait time was a big factor in letting students think for the answer. Not giving away the answer too quickly, but encouraging thought was observed throughout. The use of physical white boards instead of virtual ones appeared more and more as the weeks progressed.

By the end of the first session, the overall sentiment of a positive and enjoyable experience trumped their initial trepidation and worrying about a lack of engagement. In fact, they collectively enjoyed tutoring the students and made sure to express that to me.

The Prestige: The Aftermath

The PSTs learned to assist and buttress each other during these live sessions. For instance, they private messaged each other in the chat feature of Zoom to help either find or navigate a website to use. In some cases, they would ask the students, as these little ones were

able to navigate the web better than the PSTs! Additionally, if one PST saw another getting tired, they would jump in to help.

Overall, the PSTs conveyed a sense of enjoyment and fulfillment from this experience. One of them noted they really enjoyed working with students again, even if it was online. Another stated math was not their strong suit, but this experience increased their confidence to teach math. The PSTs who only had one week conveyed they wished they signed up for more. In the end, I had one PST who asked to continue tutoring beyond these three weeks!

As for the students, all of them appeared to enjoy the experience. Each time I went into a breakout room, I observed each of them actively engaged. I knew they were comfortable with the PSTs as almost all the students at some point asked to work on another activity, request an online math game, or change the rules of the game to make it “more fun” and challenging. In some cases, the students tried and embraced a new concept with the PSTs and flourished.

Takeaways for Teachers

I suggest educators reach out to your local colleges and universities. Leveraging PSTs is a win-win for these future educators and students alike. Many PSTs may not have the chance to work one-on-one with students, and this opportunity will aid in their understanding of educating these young and eager learners. Additionally, the students will also benefit in the experience of additional tutoring and online education.

Conclusion

Disruptions regularly occur in education: snow days, power outages, broken water mains, etc. As educators, we strive to be proactive in the face of issues, however big or small, and continue our charge of educating our students. The pandemic provided a large challenge for myself to connect my PSTs with an active learning experience, one I was happy to embrace.

In the end, everyone learned. The PSTs took the lessons from our course and applied it in an online setting. The students gained additional attention, interaction, and knowledge from the PSTs. As for myself, I felt reinforced with the fact that persistence pays off and pays out to everyone involved. Feeling akin to Louis and Clark, together with my department, we embarked on a journey filled with unknowns, challenges, and roadblocks. Each of these we overcame with positive results overall, and an open door to future hyflex applications. As the Na’vi say, “Sivako: rise to the challenge” (Cameron, 2009).

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