

Winter 2020

## Teaching & Learning During COVID-19: Alternative Instructional Activities through Individualized Learning Plans

Kerry Weir  
*SUNY Old Westbury*, [weirk@oldwestbury.edu](mailto:weirk@oldwestbury.edu)

Michelle Wohlman-Izakson  
*SUNY Old Westbury*

Lina Gilic  
*State University of New York at Old Westbury*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe>



Part of the [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Weir, Kerry; Wohlman-Izakson, Michelle; and Gilic, Lina (2020) "Teaching & Learning During COVID-19: Alternative Instructional Activities through Individualized Learning Plans," *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*: Vol. 3 : No. 2 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe/vol3/iss2/10>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education* by an authorized editor of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---

# Teaching & Learning During COVID-19: Alternative Instructional Activities through Individualized Learning Plans

KERRY E. WEIR,  
MICHELLE WOHLMAN-IZAKSON,  
AND LINA GILIC

*SUNY Old Westbury*

*SUNY Old Westbury*

*SUNY Old Westbury*

## Introduction

“Effective Wednesday, March 11, 2020,” began the email to the campus community from SUNY Old Westbury’s President, Dr. Calvin Butts, “no face to face classes will take place.” The following day, the campus update read, “Governor Cuomo today announced that SUNY and CUNY colleges and universities are to make plans to move to distance learning.” Within 24 hours, the Dean of the School of Education had asked for plans to move instruction online, immediately following spring break. During the next few days, the Exceptional Education and Learning Department (EEL) drafted contingency plans for undergraduate and graduate courses, teacher candidate observation hours, and the Applied Learning Practicum, commonly referred to as student teaching. In the beginning days of the pandemic, it was unclear if and how teacher candidates might participate in their student teaching placements. As plans to build an alternative care facility on the

campus grounds began to take shape and the pandemic worsened in Nassau County, where SUNY Old Westbury (OW) resides, the reality that the semester, in general, and the Applied Learning Practicum, in particular, would be changed became increasingly undeniable.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 75 teacher candidates from OW were placed in public schools across Long Island. From Valley Stream to East Hampton and Lindenhurst to Manhasset, at the time the coronavirus crisis emerged, OW teacher candidates were teaching and learning in 20 unique public-school districts. Of those students, 18 were in the Exceptional Education and Learning Department. From co-taught classroom environments to self-contained settings, these special education teacher candidates were exposed to the continuum of placements across the field. Working collaboratively with their cooperating teachers, the teacher candidates were creating lesson plans, instructing students in whole and

small group settings, and establishing themselves as part of their elementary school communities. On March 11, 2020, the first OW teacher candidate was asked to leave her placement. In the days following, there were numerous emails and telephone conversations between the Director of Field Experiences at OW and public-school personnel regarding the continued placement and support of OW teacher candidates in school districts who had closed, or were closing, their building doors.

By the middle of March, it became apparent to the EEL faculty that teacher candidates were experiencing a variety of challenges. Some candidates were invited to join their cooperating teachers in Google Classrooms, while others were told that access to their field placements were temporarily suspended. The contributions by those student candidates still engaged in their placements varied from filming short read-aloud videos, creating worksheets, writing new social stories about handwashing, or teaching a mini-lesson in their virtual classroom. Like everyone navigating this new teaching reality, teacher candidates were sent into an experience for which none of them had been adequately prepared.

The COVID-19 disruption to the field placement experience prompted faculty to design alternative instructional activities to augment clinical placements for teacher candidates. Using the Council for Exceptional Children Initial Preparation Standards, along with the New York State Teaching Standards, the facul-

ty created a grid that included a series of learning activities rooted in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective special educators. This 6-part document (see Appendix 1; originally a 3x2 grid) aligned various instructional activities under one of the three specific categories: knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Together with their faculty field supervisor, each teacher candidate was asked to propose an individualized learning plan. Depending upon how much access to the virtual classroom and cooperating teacher each candidate had, they selected an individualized number of learning activities that would supplement and deepen their understanding of the field.

All teacher candidates were required to keep a journal of their experiences and to design a unit of study. Asking teacher candidates to document their experiences in a journal specifically addressed and incorporated one of the SUNY Applied Learning criteria: monitoring and continuous improvement. “By writing about their teaching experiences during this unprecedented time, teacher candidates could express their feelings and frustrations, classroom successes and struggles – and bring that work to their weekly seminar,” shared Sanja Cale, Chair of Exceptional Education and Learning. The unit of study—the second requirement of the Applied Learning Practicum—needed to support an elementary learning standard and topic of the candidate’s choice. It had to include at least one distance learning activity while demonstrating the ability to incorporate and utilize technology

**“Like everyone navigating this new teaching reality, teacher candidates were sent into an experience for which none of them had been adequately prepared.”**

in the lesson plan design. These specific requirements were added to meet the new demands of distance learning facing educators across the nation. The journal and unit of study were the only two alternative activities for which all candidates were responsible.

The teacher candidates that remained connected to their cooperating teachers and students were required to continue full participation in distance learning. Additional activities were required for the teacher candidates whose placements had been disrupted. For example, teacher candidates created various resource guides for families of students with disabilities and shared the materials with their cooperating teachers. Other candidates designed Pinterest Boards to curate the look of their future classroom. Working together, two teacher candidates created professional Instagram accounts where they shared lesson plan ideas, motivational quotes, favorite books, and tips for accessorizing appropriate work attire. Utilizing the resources of professional organizations and technical assistance centers, teacher candidates engaged in learning modules and webinars. Following these events, they shared their knowledge with their OW colleagues and cooperating teachers via Zoom meetings. One group of teacher candidates used their time in quarantine to start a book club, during which they met virtually to discuss chapters in Todd Whitaker's book, *What Great Teachers Do Differently*.

Allowing each teacher candidate to design an individualized learning plan to augment their clinical placement experience, the EEL faculty serendipitously utilized the COVID-19 crisis to pivot

and model individualized education. Individualized education plans are the cornerstone of special education and this global crisis created the opportunity to extend individualized learning to teacher candidates in higher education. Where the Applied Learning Practicum had once been a uniform, singular experience—student teaching in a public-school classroom—it had now become an individualized learning experience and an additional opportunity for an authentic applied learning experience. Each faculty member worked collaboratively with each teacher candidate to design a plan of study that both challenged and excited the candidates about the field of education.

Generating individualized plans of study for every teacher candidate was not without challenges. Given the fluidity of the COVID-19 crisis across lower New York, some teacher candidates initially had access to cooperating teachers and virtual classrooms, but were later disconnected because of illness or security concerns related to technology. This instability meant that faculty supervisors and teacher candidates needed to periodically review the plans of study to ensure that the selected activities met the standards for rigor in the field experience.

With the introduction of virtual classrooms, teacher candidates needed to build a rapport with both students and their families. Prior to COVID-19, creating meaningful relationships with students was done within the elementary classroom through small work groups, individual conferences, and natural, spontaneous conversation. Once instruction moved online, teacher candidates needed to find new ways to connect with

students and with parents. Meeting over Zoom felt much different than the classroom and teacher candidates needed to adjust to meet the changing dynamic. Despite the screens separating teacher candidates and their students, they were expected to continue to develop relationships and to support the emotional and academic needs of the elementary students. Teacher candidates worked with their faculty supervisors and cooperating teachers to create new activities specifically to address social-emotional development (for example, encouraging young students to do one special thing for their parents and share that experience during the next class session).

An unanticipated concern was the increase of stress for the teacher candidates. The shift to distance learning was unexpected, new, and challenging. With the sudden instructional changes came anxiety. Managing their own anxieties and fears, while simultaneously teaching young students with many of those same worries, was something that teacher candidates, faculty, and cooperating teachers needed to address. Since the conclusion of the Applied Learning Practicum did not align with the end of the public-school calendar, many teacher candidates were concerned for their cooperating teachers and their students. They did not want to end their role. Some teacher candidates were given the option to continue to support their cooperating teachers, while others faded their engagement in the online classroom.

At the conclusion of the semester, teacher candidates found themselves with a number of tangible work artifacts that could be included in a digital portfolio. Many of these artifacts—the

family resource guide or the Instagram presence, for example—were takeaways that, had the COVID-19 pandemic not disrupted the student teaching experience, would not exist. The additional webinars and learning modules that students selected helped them build a specific area of expertise for which they might not otherwise have made time. The variety of instructional activities, along with the choice and freedom for students to self-select, has become an additional applied learning instrument tool for the EEL faculty to use during the subsequent Applied Learning Practicum experiences. If teacher candidates return to classrooms this fall, the alternative instructional activities will continue to be embedded into the weekly seminar component of the Applied Learning Practicum.

Online teaching tools were an integral component of distance learning this spring. During the summer months, EEL faculty plan to identify additional digital tools to support instruction, assessment, and reflective practice. In the future, online journals may replace tangible notebooks or logs to allow for continuous communication with college faculty. Video presentations may replace face-to-face presentations utilizing content created on digital devices with social media such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, or Facebook. Teacher candidates may create read aloud materials for students to use during a virtual lesson. Once believed to be exclusive to online instruction, incorporating these additional technologies into the field experience advances the pedagogy and skills of both the teacher candidates and the faculty.

Come September, the Applied Learning Practicum experience for OW teacher candidates in the Exceptional Education and Learning Department will need to include instructional experiences with students with exceptionalities as well as neurotypical students. Being able to place students in an inclusive classroom would be preferred. Should learning be remote this fall, placement in inclusive classrooms will allow teacher candidates to fulfill their teaching certification requirements. Developing these partnerships over the weeks ahead will be a central focus of summer work.

Throughout the semester, teacher candidates were asked to journal their thoughts and experiences. This activity was designed to meet the fifth SUNY Approved Applied Learning criteria that addresses assessment and evaluation. As teacher candidates concluded their teacher preparation and composed their culminating reflection papers, they shared advice with future OW students who will participate in the Applied Learning Practicum next fall. The themes that ran throughout their reflections were to maintain a positive attitude in the face of challenges, continuously adjust instruction, and remain grateful. Their advice captures some of the most relevant and important skills of any teacher in any classroom setting - virtual or otherwise. ■

## Appendix 1

### Alternative Instructional Activities to Augment Clinical Placements for Student Teachers Exceptional Education and Learning Department, Spring 2020, SUNY Old Westbury

#### *Knowledge*

- Teachers acquire knowledge of each student and demonstrate knowledge of student development and learning to promote achievement for all students. (NYST – Standard 1)
- Teachers know the content they are responsible for teaching and plan instruction that ensures growth and achievement for all students. (NYST – Standard 2)
- Beginning special education professionals understand how exceptionalities may interact with development and learning and use this knowledge to provide meaningful and challenging learning experiences for individuals with exceptionalities. (CEC – Standard 1)
- Beginning special education professionals use knowledge of general and specialized curricula to individualize learning for individuals with exceptionalities. (CEC – Standard 3)

#### *Knowledge Activities*

- Student Profile – Reflecting upon their student teaching experience, teacher candidates will select one student from their field placement and write a PLAAFP statement. In their statement, they will include a description of the student's needs (academic & behavioral) and description of the student's current level of performance. (NYST 1; CEC 1)
- Prepare a Unit of Study (Knowledge) – Teacher candidates will design a unit of study that includes (4) lesson plans. Included in the plans, students must design one distance learning activity and one plan that utilizes technology (websites, learning apps, virtual field trip, etc.). (NYST 2; CEC 3)
- IRIS Center – Utilizing the IRIS Resource Center, teacher candidates will complete (1) learning module in an area of their choice [Assessment, Instruction, RTI, Collaboration, Differentiated Instruction, etc.]. [Source: <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/> (NYST 1; CEC 1, 4, 5)]

## *Skills*

- Teachers implement instruction that engages and challenges all students to meet or exceed the learning standards. (NYST – Standard 3)
- Teachers work with all students to create a dynamic learning environment that supports achievement and growth. (NYST – Standard 4)
- Teachers use multiple measures to assess and document student growth, evaluate instructional effectiveness, and modify instruction. (NYST – Standard 5)
- Beginning special education professionals create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments so that individuals with exceptionalities become active and effective learners and develop emotional well-being, positive social interactions, and self-determination. (CEC – Standard 2)
- Beginning special education professionals use multiple methods of assessment and data-sources in making educational decisions. (CEC – Standard 4)
- Beginning special education professionals select, adapt, and use a repertoire of evidence-based instructional strategies to advance learning of individuals with exceptionalities. (CEC – Standard 5)

## *Skills Activities*

- Prepare of Unit of Study (Skills) – Teacher candidates will demonstrate their ability to design a unit of study by including a video (10-15 minutes) of the student providing content and instruction and an accompanying assessment activity. (NYST 3, 5; CEC 4, 5)
- Classroom Environment Pinterest Board – Utilizing Pinterest, teacher candidates will design a page that curates the look of their classroom. It should include bulletin board ideas, front door decorations, classroom management and organizational ideas, etc. (NYST 4; CEC 2)
- Teach Like A Champion – To evaluate instructional effectiveness, teacher candidates will watch and critique (3) teaching videos. After watching the clips, candidates will compose a reflection paper that discusses the positive/negative instructional techniques based on the Principles of Instruction article. [Sources: <https://teachlikeachampion.com/blog/?s=video>, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/calibration/videos.html>, <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Rosenshine.pdf>] (NYST 5; CEC 4, 5)

## *Disposition*

- Teachers demonstrate professional responsibility and engage relevant stakeholders to maximize student growth, development, and learning. (NYST – Standard 6)
- Teachers set informed goals and strive for continuous professional growth. (NYST – Standard 7)
- Beginning special education professionals use foundational knowledge of the field and their professional Ethical Principles and Practice Standards to inform special education practice, to engage in lifelong learning, and to advance the profession. (CEC – Standard 6)
- Beginning special education professionals collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, individuals with exceptionalities, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways to address the needs of individuals with exceptionalities across a range of learning experiences. (CEC – Standard 7)

## *Disposition Activities*

- Online Learning & Professional Growth – Teacher candidates will access and participate in (1) CEC webinar. Following the webinar, students will “turnkey” their learning by creating a worksheet, user guide or video presentation for their peers. (NYST 7; CEC 6)
- Educational Documentary Roundtable – Teacher candidates will watch (1) of the 2019 Education Documentaries on Netflix and hold a discussion group following the viewing. [Source: <https://www.rasmussen.edu/degrees/education/blog/education-documentaries-netflix/>] (NYST 7, CEC 6)
- Book Review & Reflection – Teacher candidates will select a book from the collection of the Top 50 Best Books for New Teachers. After reading the book, they will write a review. [Source: <https://www.topmastersineducation.com/50-best-books-for-new-teachers/>] (NYST 7; CEC 6)
- Family Resource Guide – Teacher candidates will create a resource guide for families of students with disabilities. Candidates may select to create a guide regarding resources for a specific disability category or a more general guide to IDEA, Section 504, or ADA. (NYST 6; CEC 7)

## *References*

- New York State Teaching Standards, September, 2011 – (NYST Standard)
- CEC Initial Level Special Educator Preparation Standards – (CEC Standard)