

9-2020

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Recommended Citation

Buschelman, A. K. (2020). COVID and Clinical Practice: Now is the Time to Engage Future Educators. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 23 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2302092020>

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COVID and Clinical Practice: Now is the Time to Engage Future Educators

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After a tumultuous end to the 2019–2020 school year, it is more important than ever to cultivate new teachers in the field of education. Combining the experience of veteran teachers with the eagerness and adaptability of students in clinical practice (student teaching) a new form of co-teaching may emerge for the fall semester that covers both in classroom and virtual classroom options. Student teachers experienced the student side of virtual learning during the spring semester and are able to offer valuable insight and knowledge for school communities. This article provides five guidelines for how teachers can mentor clinical practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic: (a) reflect and relate; (b) collaborate and listen; (c) trust and engage, (d) develop and empower; and (e) converse, recommend, and release. The article offers specific discussion topics and practices to implement during field experience for a successful student teaching experience for both the student and the mentor teacher.

Keywords

Clinical practice, student teaching, field experience, mentor teacher, cooperating teacher, student teacher

We all know what a crazy spin the coronavirus placed us in as educators; and yet we continue to spin. School presidents, superintendents, and boards are faced with the decision of how and when to open. Classroom teachers are faced with the dilemma of how to teach virtually while trying to accommodate for those economically challenged students that maybe did not have access to computers, let alone internet. And parents are asked to make big decisions while struggling with the precarious balancing act of working at home, educating at home, and simply staying at home. As economic pressures on parents increase, the desire for a Catholic education is weighed against the financial impacts on the family. Parishes and schools must generate new ideas to create a desire for this education as a valuable asset to our communities.

In the world of higher education, classes need to continue as a means of helping students work towards or finish their professional education. In the realm of teacher education, classes continue to progress on how to be an effective teacher. However, how does one educate a student to be a teacher without a classroom to observe and participate? How does one learn about classroom management without students in a classroom? On a very basic level, how do the students complete the mandated hours to become a fully certified teacher? As a teacher educator at Creighton University, these questions occupied my mind at during the spring of 2020 and continue to ruminate as the uncertainties related to COVID-19 continue.

When schools closed quickly this spring, some districts decided to end the clinical practice experiences for our college students. However, several districts, schools and teachers kept these future teachers active in their role and even leaned on them for assistance. It was the Catholic schools that remained steadfast and encouraged the extension of field experience for our students. This decision to continue educating our future teachers proved fruitful for not only the students, but even more so for the cooperating and mentor teachers. Mentor teachers were asked to create virtual lessons and host virtual classrooms; even though some educators had little background with having an online presence or even how to begin planning these lessons. Enter the future teachers.

Our Creighton field experience students used their knowledge from personal online experiences, their coursework in both the education realm and other liberal arts areas, and their general desire to be a teacher to help schools around the nation continue to learn. Being students at a Catholic Jesuit University, these pre-service teachers were viewing the situation with not only thoughts of new learning, but of becoming *men and women for and with others* as they assisted their mentor teachers, students, and parents in the physical and virtual classrooms. Collaboration was happening at a level of colleagues rather than of subordinates and the virtual classroom was engaged. The Archdiocese of Omaha even created a policy in accordance with their Safe Environment Training that outlines how to safely host an online meeting group. We gathered together as an educational community and a faith community to continue to provide an education for not only our PK-12 students, but our pre-service education students as well.

Drawn from the experience of supporting teacher candidates during the spring 2020 semester, I present five simple guidelines to follow to incorporate a student teacher into your classroom during and despite the uncertainties associated with COVID-19.

1. Reflect and Relate

You have been there and done that. Your experience, knowledge, and love of teaching are the reasons you decided to have a student teacher in your classroom. Reflect back on your college field experiences and your first years as a teacher. What do you wish you would have known? As a clinical practitioner, this is often the first occurrence of truly getting to know students, being responsible for decisions, planning and implementing lessons, and handling discipline issues. In this pandemic environment, it is important to place yourself in the shoes of a new student teacher, think about the upheaval they have experienced due to COVID-19, and let your *cura personalis* shine through. Help your student teacher identify the best ways to approach this fall and the unique situation. What have you tried that worked well? What did not work well? What would you like to try? What adaptations did you incorporate that made you a better teacher? Your pre-service teacher will be looking to you for guidance and confidence; help them see what your experiences have taught you and be willing to listen to see what their experiences have taught them.

2. Collaborate and Listen

The fall semester is full of learning routines and procedures while developing a class climate that will set the tone for the entire school year. As all teachers can attest to though, it's not simply learning them. It is modeling, reinforcing, and adjusting them as well. While this will still be true this fall, it is certainly going to look different. What is a good routine for virtual learning? Do you need to think about both in classroom and virtual environments? If splitting days or learning environments, how can you ensure an equal education is being provided for all students? These questions and more can be hashed out with a clinical practitioner and hopefully ease the burden of making all of the decisions and being responsible for setting everything up for the semester alone. Your proficiency as a teacher combined with the student's experience as a recent online student with knowledge of the latest pedagogical strategies and virtual teaching methods can combine together to create a dynamic duo for your students. What luck for your students to have *two* teachers ready to help them and able to teach using multiple modalities.

The key to all of this is to collaborate early. Once you know what your district and/or school is planning for the fall in terms of face-to-face and virtual instruction, begin talking with your field experience student. Brainstorm ideas together that will assist you in the managing of your classroom

both in person and virtually. Listen to your field experience student and begin an open and trusting relationship. Get to know your student teacher's personality, strengths, and desires as a future teacher. Use these strengths to help you in your classroom and again, ease the burden of facing a new school year alone.

3. Trust and Engage

It's difficult to give over control of your classroom, but if you do it gradually you will reap the benefits and your student teacher will be better prepared. Pre-service teachers are excited, energized, and eager to be in a classroom for an entire semester. If you begin collaboration early, the integration time for your clinical practitioner to become a steady presence in the classroom will be earlier and their confidence will progressively increase. Students will see them as another teacher and know they can trust them to be a positive influence that can help when asked. At Creighton, we really try to impress upon our students how important the charism of *care for the whole person* is within a classroom. Seeing our youth, whether they be eight or eighteen, trying to navigate this new form of education will be difficult. It will take patience, creativity, and faith in abilities to get through to all students while building confidence and training for becoming a full-time educator.

Start with small responsibilities before the first day even begins: create bulletin boards, labels, and nametags; gather and perform the daily opening prayers; prepare an introductory letter for the parents with step-by-step guides for virtual learning and expectations; or create guidelines for online etiquette and meeting protocol. Trust your clinical practitioner to pre-record readings or lectures and create virtual scavenger hunts or field trips. These activities help the student teacher take ownership of the classroom and show them what starting a new school year will entail. During the first week of school help the field experience student get comfortable with the classroom, school, and district technology by entrusting them with tasks such as taking role and lunch count, walking students to specials and recess, returning student papers, and leading daily prayer or reflection time. This will help the clinical practitioner become more comfortable with student names, build relationships, and start them thinking about timing throughout the day. Come the second week, let them begin a few lessons either in person or virtually. Perhaps the student teacher could record the virtual lessons first to practice and then teach them face-to-face in a classroom. Work together to create a

plan that allows the clinical practitioner to be active, gradually trusting them further until eventually they are responsible for the entire day and all of its inner workings. The more the student teacher can be engaged with your continuous, positive support, the better for all involved.

4. Develop and Empower

Towards the middle of the semester, you will form a partnership with your student teacher in which you will find yourself becoming more honest with your advice and yet at the same time allowing the failure to happen. With failure comes the opportunity for great growth, so long as there is a guide to help talk through the situation. Encourage and work with your field experience student to utilize the technology during this time and be an active player in their growth. Record your student teacher so they can reflect on their teaching and then do the same with yourself! You may be surprised what you see; and the experience may create new discussion avenues for the two of you to explore. Be open to their comments and let them help you advance in your abilities as a teacher and mentor as well.

Your student teacher will develop daily in their abilities and their confidence will grow. Empower them to begin planning full units with little assistance. Let them diverge from the norm and experiment to help them find their own teaching style both in the classroom and online. There are several different online platforms available to us right now as educators that it may be a time to test out a new platform the student teacher is familiar with or would like to try. Perhaps for part of a day during this time, you are in the library available virtually while not being physically in the room (if permitted). You can easily be in the virtual classroom as well without instructing or leading the session. It's also a good idea to use one of those personal days and see how the clinical practitioner handles the room with a substitute teacher. As a mentor, your goals during this time are to recognize, affirm, and develop your student teacher's strengths through the use of feedback and collaboration. Be a sounding board for them and use your wisdom and experience to help guide them as they begin full control of the classroom or virtual learning.

With the maturity of your field experience student, you can also use this time for your own professional development. If you are proactive in forming a true partnership with your clinical practitioner where you can entrust them to teach the students and do it well, you will find yourself with extra time to work on your own teaching and development. Explore new technology

you have heard about or want to implement in your classroom. Prepare an interactive unit or lesson you have always sought to complete, but never had the time to plan. Enhance some of the lessons you have planned for the next semester so that you are able to engage more learning styles. Even take your own online professional development class. When you learn and continue to develop your craft, you are setting an example for your clinical practitioner and your students. This could also provide a reflection time to think about how you are carrying out your beliefs in your classroom and your teaching. Each of these options lead to you being a stronger, more focused teacher which in turn leads to a more engaged classroom where students feel empowered to learn and gain a deeper understanding of material.

5. Converse, Recommend, and Release

Now that your partnership is formed, trust is evident, and your student teacher has their own style you can begin making recommendations for their future development. Discuss strengths they have maintained and new strengths that have arisen throughout the semester. Converse with them about areas you believe they could improve and recommend suggestions for how to combat these areas and adapt them to better meet the needs of students. Talk about what your educational pathway looked like and what made you choose that path. Nearly all educators need to continue their education and earn a higher degree. Talk to your student teacher about what degree they are thinking of pursuing, what they plan to do with that degree, and where they see themselves in five years. Often, students struggle to see beyond getting through this time in their life, but they will value this discussion in the near future!

Then reflect one more time and place yourself in their shoes as a new teacher looking for a position. Another vital conversation to have with your student teacher is simply examining the ins and outs of a school system. With an unbiased attitude, talk to them about what it is like to be a new teacher in a district or school. What does a contract look like and what is included in it? What are the points of focus student teachers need to be aware of when looking to sign a contract? How do private school expectations differ from public schools? What about teacher unions? What sort of extra-curricular or leadership options are available in a school or district? What benefits can be seen from teaching at a Catholic school? While I would love to say all colleges or universities cover this (at Creighton we certainly do our best) that may not be the case and truly the more information our new teachers can have, the better.

As the weeks wind down and your time together dwindles, begin the discussion of starting the next semester or school year. What are some specifics they can focus on for their first year of teaching in their own classroom? What should they be thinking about if the pandemic continues or more schools go further online? Think about what you wish you would have known about virtual teaching before it was required. How has your focus on standards, testing, and curriculum changed as a result of the pandemic and how have you adapted to mesh the two realities?

Finally, allow your student teacher access to your lesson plans, bulletin boards, personal exams, projects, discussions, introductory letters, syllabi, calendars and anything else that may be of use. I encourage physical and digital copies of these (perhaps you create a binder as the semester goes along) so the new teacher can have a visual without needing to open multiple digital files. We all know it's best not to recreate the wheel and teachers are notorious for begging, borrowing, and stealing each other's ideas. As a new teacher, those ideas are limited and often an exhausting internet search is the result of needing inspiration. Anything you and others can provide will be a benefit! Release your student teacher with the knowledge and tools to fill their teacher tool box. Release your student teacher knowing that you have provided an excellent example for a new teacher and are a willing resource for years to come.

Again, I cannot encourage you enough to take on the opportunity of having a pre-service educator in your classroom. Be a meaningful part of the life of a future teacher. As a mentor/cooperating teacher, you are a primary source of inspiration and will provide them with their first taste of what it means to be a teacher. And what a great, tumultuous career it is! Show them the beauty of being a teacher! We have exhibited throughout this pandemic time that teachers are adaptable, irreplaceable, and community leaders. Now more than ever, we need to cultivate talented people and future teachers to take on the ever-changing, fast-paced world of education. Who knows what you may learn from this experience?