

Developing the Next Generation of Distance Supervision

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Abstract

Student teaching has long been an essential component of teacher education programs, and effective supervision is essential for successful internship experiences. Pre-service students' needs must be weighed against the limitation of time and access for the university supervisor, often a full-time faculty member who has a formidable teaching load and other responsibilities. Additionally, direct, in-person observations can create observer effect, altering the reality of what is actually being observed. This article examines one university's use of distant supervision utilizing technology to aid in the virtual classroom observations and conferencing to allow an elementary education major to student teach in a rural southwest Kansas school.

Developing the Next Generation of Distance Supervision

Student teaching has long been an essential component of teacher education programs, and, with the ever-increasing complexity of teaching, that internship experiences are becoming even more critical to producing successful new teachers. Yet, student teacher supervision continues to pose challenges. Pre-service students' needs must be weighed against the limitations of time and access for the university supervisor, often a full-time faculty member with a formidable teaching load and other professional responsibilities. As Allen, et al. (2014) note, the role of the university supervisor has not been viewed as a prestigious faculty responsibility. Therefore, it is a task often moved from one new faculty member to the next. Also, when universities serve large rural areas, the issue of great distances between the university and the preferred site for student teaching place additional demands on university supervisors.

The traditional supervision model involves the university supervisor visiting the classroom, typically sitting in the back, taking notes, and filling out forms. But these in-person observations raise another issue: How the presence of the observer changes what is observed. The Hawthorne effect, for example, recognizes and accounts for the way subjects being observed alter their behavior because they are being observed (Jones, 1992). In short, the act of observing changes the nature of that which is observed, so the actual reality is not truly captured. It goes without

saying this applies to the supervision of student teachers, not only when a cooperating teacher is observing, but especially when a university supervisor—typically unfamiliar to the students—visits the classroom for a formal observation.

One way to address the problems of providing effective supervision for rural sites is through electronic supervision. It is also not unreasonable to assume electronic supervision could provide a more authentic glimpse into the workings of the classroom. Early indications suggest electronic supervision can reproduce the characteristics of traditional on-site supervision for pre-service teachers (Hamel, 2012), although this research is exploratory and preliminary. Our work is also exploratory, as we are seeking to address these issues of remote locations and time and manpower restraints. We are attempting to use technology to improve learning opportunities for pre-service teachers in field experiences by providing access to more sites, without adding a greater burden of time to university supervisors. Likewise, we added another element into the situation, with the classroom observation actually being done virtually and live, rather than having another individual in the room for direct observation, to be less invasive in the environment. This article examines the approach by the Kansas State University College of Education's Office of Field Experiences to accomplish this. It details initial research for distant supervision utilizing technology to aid in the virtual classroom observations and conferencing to allow an elementary education major to student teach in rural southwest Kansas.

We have relied on partnerships with area districts through our Professional Development Schools. We are seeking to expand the network to underserved areas, but the travel time required for supervision was an obvious constraint. Because of such constraints, we began to examine virtual opportunities for providing the supervision. After extensive consideration and discussion, we selected a combination of technology hardware and software to address these concerns. We began with Swivl, a video capturing system that maneuvers the recording device to follow the speaker by use of a marker, and Zoom, a distance conferencing application, to monitor and record two weeklong math workshops held at another local facility. The Swivl is a device that holds an iPad or other mobile device that fastens directly onto a tripod or can sit on a flat surface to record classroom activities. The teacher wears a marker on a lanyard that connects through Bluetooth, which allows the Swivl to rotate and follow the teacher throughout the room. Prior to beginning this in the student teacher's classroom, we tested it through other on-campus classes and in several workshops held in the community. This provided opportunities for modifying our approach—before using the process at a greater distance.

Concerns

This project raises some key issues when recording pre-service teachers in the classroom. The first is the necessity of a distance viewing/recording program to work with Swivl. In this case, we have used Zoom, though some difficulties still exist, such as volume and quality of the recordings; because of the use of Zoom, the iPad microphone is the only one can record sound. Issues also exist regarding the storage and transfer of these recordings, as well as the security of the data collected.

Virtual Supervision

Possibly one of the greatest developments has been our use of this process in supervising student teachers. In Fall 2014, we began using Swivl for our first virtual observations of a first-grade student teacher in a teaching site in southwest Kansas, approximately four hours from the university. We use Swivl and Zoom so university supervisors can observe her teaching; additionally, we use Zoom for debriefings between the university supervisor and student teacher, as well as student teacher class meetings with the supervisor.

For this initial implementation, we have combined virtual and in-person supervision of her classroom, to ensure that we are not missing key information in our supervisions. And, while we continue to fine-tune our virtual approaches and techniques, we are convinced such virtual observations are providing a thorough and unobtrusive experience in the classroom. In one situation, we observed her in the classroom, while another university faculty member observed the same class from her office on the university campus. Those onsite supervisors conferenced with the student following the observation, and the on-campus faculty member participated virtually in that conference. The virtual supervisor was able to provide feedback regarding the lesson, while not adding to distractions in the classroom.

To be successful, this type of arrangement requires interests from all parties—the university, school and district officials, and the cooperating teacher, as well as a pre-service teacher's interest in that location. The required materials are a Swivl, an iPad or other recording device, and a tripod. The site also needs a wireless Internet connection, as well as Zoom capabilities, and an individual to serve as a university supervisor on a limited basis.

We see numerous benefits to virtual observations, not the least of which is more efficient use of time for university supervisors. Too often the university supervisor is rushed to cover numerous observations at locations miles apart. Virtual observations cut down on travel time, allowing for a less rushed pace and more reflective and deliberate observation of the student's lesson and abilities.

It also provides the least intrusive way to observe the student teacher while getting an accurate representation of the teaching and interaction taking place, since any visitor can affect the classroom environment. Additionally, it provides a university supervisor

more opportunities to review the lesson, rather than a one-time shot with an in-person observation. Using this approach regularly allows students in the classroom to adjust to being recorded.

The virtual observation experience, in time, can allow a university to increase its potential field experience sites to include more remote areas that are longer distances from the university campus. This makes it possible for pre-service teachers to have field experiences closer to their hometowns or to areas where they are interested in living. It also means area cooperating teachers will not feel overwhelmed by continual requests to mentor pre-service teachers. An expanded list of potential school sites offers more remote schools/districts to have access to field experience students, so those districts become more acquainted with the teacher candidates.

Future Plans/Implications

This semester, we have one student teacher at an elementary school in southwest Kansas; next semester we will have three in that district. Eventually, we plan to use it as a prototype for similar virtual professional development sites. We also see this as an avenue for extensive research, including a video ethnographic project focusing on aspects of successful teaching.

Conclusion

Several forces are pushing us toward virtual –observations primarily economics and the need to place teachers in high-need areas. Everything we have accomplished to date indicates we can be as successful with virtual observations as we are with direct, in-person observations. Much like teaching in-person courses vs. online courses, we face challenges by approaching observations virtually. However, we are finding strengths that make virtual observations truly beneficial for everyone involved.

Works Cited

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