

eLearning for edLeaders at Emporia State University

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Abstract: The building level leadership practicum at Emporia State University in Emporia, KS, has moved from a face-to-face experience to a totally online experience. Students participate in 56 total learning activities which are reported online for the two semester course. The program provides flexibility to students and still allows quality interaction via structured discussions. In addition, students select a practicum research project which allows them to gain hands on experiences by following the project from start to completion. The shift in program has garnered positive student response and support. This program utilizes elearning to prepare graduate building level leadership students for a 21st century leadership role in schools (SERC, 2017).

Keywords: building level practicum; online administrative learning; 21st century leadership preparation

Introduction

For several years, the School Leadership Department at Emporia State University had been working to transition all remaining blended and face-to-face courses to a totally online format. The final courses to complete the transition consisted of both semesters of the building leadership practicum experience. With that move successfully completed, all of our graduate programs are now offered in an online learning format. We originally began utilizing the Blackboard format but have subsequently transitioned to the Canvas online instruction format which seems to serve our needs and those of our students very well (<https://www.emporia.edu/it/learning/canvas.html>). This article will provide an overview of the total online practicum that has continued to evolve since the move to a completely online format.

Background

One of our guiding premises behind this effort has been the acknowledgement that first, we are working with a different type of learner in our graduate leadership programs; the use of technology is an ingrained part of their learning and life experiences. And, if they are to be viable 21st century leaders in their schools, they must be very familiar with the potential that technology holds in a number of building leadership areas. To that end, we have endeavored to design a program which is user friendly, which challenges our students to extend and enhance their learning, and which causes them to think and reflect on the myriad responsibilities of building leaders as they seek to promote quality teaching and learning in their schools.

We think it is imperative that our prospective building leaders have the opportunity to interact and work with leaders at the elementary, middle and high school levels, extending that collaboration to specific areas such as working with special education directors and athletic directors as well. Students are asked to observe both the similarities and differences required for leaders in each of the areas as they work to complete their practicum experience. The overall practicum activities (56 total activities) are divided between the two academic semesters (<https://www.emporia.edu/teach/slmste/course-descriptions.html>). In addition, students are afforded the flexibility of completing the activities for each semester as they fit into their schedules, with the final submission deadline being the critical date for their completion.

The Practicum

During the fall semester, students complete their activities through interviews, observations, shadowing experiences and participation in school and district events. There are nine required areas in the first semester's work. For each activity, students describe what they did, what they learned from the activity and provide implications for themselves as future building leaders (<https://www.emporia.edu/teach/slmste/edadmin-building/>

Fall Semester: Activity areas include the following:

1. Interviewing and assisting **Non-certified and Certified Staff** members
2. Learning about various types of **School Records**
3. Examining the requirements of **Special Education** services
4. Delving into the **Personnel** services of the district
5. Observing and discussion effective **Time Management and Organizational Skills**
6. Examine the elements that make up **School Climate**
7. Reflecting on **Diversity** and its impact on a school
8. Composing a **Philosophy of Education** that reflects their focus as educational leaders
9. Updating and modifying a **Resume'** to focus on their leadership preparation and goals

During the spring semester, students continue their activities through additional interviews, observations, shadowing experiences and participation in school and district events. There are eight required areas in the second semester's work. Again, for each activity, students describe what they did, assess what they learned from the activity and provide implications for themselves as future building leaders.

Spring Semester: Activities revolve around eight additional areas of a school and its requisite leadership requirements and include the following:

1. **School Governance**, which includes job shadowing experiences at the elementary, middle

and high school levels

2. Participating in **Student Activities and Supervision Responsibilities**
3. Direct involvement in activities that build and foster positive **Community Relationships**
4. Becoming more knowledgeable of **Building Activities**
5. Learning about the nuances of the **Building Budget**
6. Examining the components that make up the **Building Master Schedule**
7. Better understanding the elements that make up a school and district's **Curriculum**
8. Participating in the various components involved in assessing effective **Instruction**

In addition to the above requirements, practicum students participate in a series of online **discussions** each semester, allowing them to directly interact with their classmates and reflect on a variety of issues that they are experiencing during the practicum (depts.washington.edu/.../using-online-discussion-boards-to-enhance-learning). Students must post their initial thoughts on the topic prior to gaining access to the thoughts of others on the topic and they must respond to a minimum of two other students during the discussions. Like the activities, discussions are divided over the two semesters and provide additional opportunities for reflection and learning as students progress through the practicum experience. Topics can range from a focus on a particular aspect of a school's operation to a self-reflection regarding what students have learned from the total experience. Students respond that they appreciate the opportunity to interact with their peers via this format and their submissions provide an indirect assessment of the activities and their impact upon the students during the total practicum experience (Skubak, 2016).

In addition to the above two areas of activity completion and discussion participation, students are asked to work with their supervising administrator in their school and decide upon a research based practicum project which they will complete over the two semesters and which will ultimately benefit their school. During the first semester, they are asked to complete a **Practicum Project Proposal** which outlines their project in somewhat general terms.

During the second semester, the completed Practicum Project is due by the second semester submission deadline. Students are able to follow the project from its inception to its implementation, gaining many skills that will be useful to them when they assume building leadership roles following the completion of their program.

The project must be research based and adhere to the framework provided as part of the assignment. Ultimately, it must be something that enhances their school in some way. Projects have ranged from organizing a total school Read Across America activity to redesigning and repurposing the in-school suspension and detention program in a school. To us, it epitomizes a great “learning by doing” activity and our students learn a great deal while working through the process to complete a successful project.

Summary

Significant learnings have occurred for us as instructors and for our students as a result of this transition to an online learning environment for our practicum students. As professors, we have learned that frequent, timely and clear communication is critical to our students’ success in the experience. We were concerned, as were some students, when we transitioned to the totally online format at mid-year, but it has turned out to be a positive experience and we all have learned a lot from it. We frequently fine tune our assignments, clarifying and making adjustments to our descriptions and reflecting on the value of the total experience to enhance the leadership skills of our students to prepare them to transition to successful building leadership roles, which is our ultimate goal.

Our students learn a great deal as well, through their work and through exchanges of ideas and comments throughout the two semesters as well as from the comments they make to their professors.

Time management remains a focus throughout the total experience, and our students learn to schedule and complete tasks in a timely way throughout the two semesters. In addition, they learn a great deal about how to provide clear and concise descriptions of their activities and to make sure others understand what they are trying to communicate in their discussions. The practicum experience gives new meaning to the term multi-tasking and our students quickly understand they need to master this skill if they are to truly become effective building leaders. Meeting deadlines is a function of effective leadership, and with the deadlines established in our practicum semesters, our students understand the importance and the ramifications of meeting reasonable deadlines (and in setting deadlines for students and staff as well).

One of the unintended consequences of moving to a total online learning environment for our students is that it promotes greater collaboration between the practicum professors; meeting regularly and brainstorming ideas and potential course upgrades have been very positive experiences for all of us. Online learning is a dynamic, not a static enterprise. It is subject to changes and enhancements and must reflect current developments in our field as well (Wegmann, et al, 2009). Our state board of education and commissioner of education in Kansas have forged a new vision and outcomes for Kansas educators and students and that shift must be reflected in our expectations for our students and their learning; and, for students in other states enrolled in our practicum course, we must create curriculum that accommodates their specific situations as well. In addition, the past few years have seen an unprecedented turnover in superintendent, principal and assistant principal positions in Kansas, underscoring the critical need to prepare future leaders to assume these positions.

We take our charge of working diligently to prepare effective 21st century educational leaders very seriously at Emporia State University. Leadership remains a critical ingredient in the success of any school, public or private. Consequently, leaders must embrace the 21st century learning needs of students and promote quality teaching to assist students in becoming prepared to enter the world of postsecondary education and the world of work as well. In order to do this, we work to establish an environment of trust and mutual respect with our students, encouraging them to think and reflect about their experiences and to ascertain best approaches to leadership as they prepare for their new roles.

Conclusion

Finally, we live in a world of change and adaptation, where our younger generation expects immediate action and response to their inquiries. We as a department have recognized that online learning is a technological reality for most students and educators today. Our program gives us the opportunity to allow active participation by educators in fairly remote parts of our state as well as educators from other parts of the country. We are no longer place bound, expecting our students to be physically present for the duration of their graduate coursework. Instead, we have put more of the burden of learning on them as students, providing them with the appropriate tools to allow them to access our thinking as professors and the thinking of their peers and apply what they are learning to their specific educational environments. Our program remains a work in progress, continuously changing to meet the learning needs of students through a practical and user friendly technology environment. By succeeding in this effort, we have truly created meaningful **eLearning for our edLeaders** as they prepare to assume building leadership roles in our 21st century schools.

In summary, the incredibly accurate and thought-provoking quote by Joel Barker regarding vision and action is based on his assertion that the role of leadership is to find, recognize, and secure the future. “Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with Action can change the world. (Barker)

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