

## Revising “Field Experience” in the Pandemic Period and Beyond

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*Teacher educators worry about how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted what and how teacher candidates are able to learn in P-12 field experiences; yet it is possible to view this period as one of opportunity rather than limitation. This commentary argues for a conception of field experience as practice rather than context. When applied across programs, this conception could help situate “field experience” across the teacher education curriculum, regardless of the physical spaces in which novices are working and studying. The author advocates a focus on essential instructional routines, especially those that engage P-12 students with rigor and can be used flexibly to teach important content, within a 3-stage developmental framework to engage novices in learning those instructional routines with increasing sophistication.*

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When much of the US shut down P-12 schools because of the global COVID-19 pandemic, teacher candidates in university-based teacher education programs experienced, alongside the P-12 students they worked with in the field, unexpected shifts in their courses of study. In March 2020, most teacher candidates in the various programs at my institution faced the abrupt end of their work in and with P-12 schools, and the state eventually offered a waiver for the hours they missed so that they could stay on track in their preparation programs. In August 2020, many of our partner school districts delayed the beginning of the school year and/or started virtually before moving to a hybrid model and then back to virtual instruction, which has continued to constrain the opportunities our teacher candidates have to engage with P-12 students and curriculum. We acknowledge that these are unprecedented times, and we hope never to experience this disruption again – and yet we face the unknown in the short term, with P-12 and university plans up in the air as the pandemic goes on. It seems likely that we will face periods – however long or short – of remote instruction until a vaccine is widely available. We have a significant number of teacher candidates, then, who will require a different approach to learning what they need to be prepared for the first years of teaching. If we are to provide these teacher candidates with opportunities to engage with P-12 students, practice the work of planning and instruction, and get and use feedback from mentors – that is, if we are to ensure the kinds of experiences that we see as essential to their preparation – we must do so creatively and also systemically. This commentary addresses the present opportunity to revise the nature of field experience in teacher education in this pandemic period and beyond.

### **Field Experience as Practice, Not Context**

The “field experience” (opportunities to observe and do teaching) has long been viewed as an indispensable component of teacher preparation (Conant, 1963). The literature on field

experience indicates the longevity of our ongoing debates about structure, content, location, and support of field experiences<sup>1</sup>; yet we have consistently emphasized context – the P-12 classroom – as the primary characteristic of field experience (see, for example, the emphases in Huling, 1998; McIntyre, 1983; Gelfuso et al., 2015). A revision to this way of thinking about field experience can begin with prioritizing *what* we want teacher candidates to learn, rather than *where*. In this vein, scholarship over the past decade has pushed teacher educators to embrace a broad notion of *practice*. This literature pushes us to conceptualize teaching as a “complex practice” (Grossman et al., 2009), declares that moving teacher candidates toward expertise requires “deliberate practice” (Deans for Impact, 2016), and emphasizes that our programs should center on “clinical practice” (AACTE, 2018).

So what might we mean by practice, and how could the concept shift in our definition of field experience? In a layperson’s terms, practice implies action; the word might be considered a synonym for *things that we do*. We “practice” primarily to achieve a goal (e.g., to get the dishes clean, to communicate an idea, to prepare students for an upcoming test). These things we do are not idiosyncratic, mindless behavior; they involve engaging in certain routines that are leveraged with specialized knowledge and judgment about how to achieve a desired outcome. Drawing on sociocultural and organizational theory, we can elicit key characteristics of practice that are meaningful for revising field experience in teacher education during and beyond the pandemic period: practice is active, involves understanding, is socially (re)developed, and relies on routines.

In his seminal piece on practice theory, Andreas Reckwitz (2002) defines practice as “a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood” (p. 250). Practice involves doing, yet Reckwitz further explains that individuals are “carriers” of practice: they “are neither autonomous nor the judgmental dopes who conform to norms: They understand the world and themselves, and use know-how and motivational knowledge, according to the particular practice” (p. 256). Elsewhere, Etienne Wenger (1998) echoes this emphasis on human understanding, explaining that practice is about “the experience of meaningfulness” in everyday activity (p. 51). To perform a meaningful action, an individual engages in a way of understanding. This understanding is not simply “knowing that,” but knowing how, when, and why to engage in the act. Such implicit understanding involves motivations, intentions, and anticipation that drive the act and carry it to completion.

Wenger further notes, “It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. In this sense, practice is always social practice” (p. 47; see also Lave & Wenger, 1991). As individuals, we belong to any number of communities of practice, such as a family, a class, or a circle of friends. Within a community, individuals engaged in a “shared enterprise” develop practices that move them toward accomplishing their common goals. The practices that individuals enact in their everyday lives are underpinned by collectively constructed understanding of their purposes, qualities, and meanings. Yet individuals within a community of practice are not mere reproducers of practices; they also transform them based on

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<sup>1</sup> The scholarship of Kenneth Zeichner demonstrates the remarkable persistence of debate and variability related to how we define field experience in teacher education (see Zeichner, 1985; Zeichner & Conklin, 2005; Zeichner & Bier, 2015).

their experiences. Change occurs as individuals, while engaging in practices, encounter “crises” that require them to modify the routine in order to meet their goals (Reckwitz, p. 255; see also Engeström, 1987).

Though this argument seeks to push beyond context (the P-12 classroom) as the primary characteristic of field experience, it is true that context makes practice meaningful. Cook and Brown (1999) note that the organizational context informs the activities of individuals doing their “real work” (p. 387). This context is not just physical space, however. As we enact practice, we draw upon tools, including objects, symbols, and discourse, to carry out the work. In this sense, the context makes the practice possible, rather than merely acting as a backdrop for it (Nardi, 1996).

To understand teaching as a practice, then, is to recognize it as active work, performed with understanding, involving a teacher’s interactions with students and content in the particular context of the instructional setting that shapes both the goals of and resources for those interactions (Ball & Cohen, 1999). The everyday practice of teaching is not idiosyncratic, but is made recognizable by the use of routines – what Leinhardt et al. (1987) describe as “shared socially scripted patterns of behavior [that] serve to reduce the cognitive complexity of the instructional environment” (p. 135). Innumerable routines structure the teacher-student-content interaction, allowing the teacher to hold constant some elements of the interaction (e.g., ways of participating in a Socratic seminar) while adjusting others (e.g., asking follow up questions or paraphrasing student responses).

Embracing this notion of teaching as a practice – as active, involving understanding, social, contextual, and routinized – could help erase the long-standing lines between learning *in* teaching as what happens in P-12 classrooms and learning *about* teaching as the role of university-based coursework. In this pandemic period, this conception of teaching as a practice can allow us to situate “field experience” across the teacher education curriculum, regardless of the physical spaces in which novices are working and studying.

### **Revising Field Experience in and Beyond the Pandemic Period**

The conception of practice just described points toward a shift in the teacher education curriculum from a focus on knowing-*about*-doing to knowing-*in*-doing. This is not a new argument: It has developed in the same practice-related body of scholarship referenced earlier (e.g., Ball & Forzani, 2011) and was advanced by the so-called “clinical turn” in teacher education (NCATE, 2010). Grossman et al. argued in 2009 that “teacher educators need to attend to the clinical aspects of practice and experiment with how to best help novices develop skilled practice” (p. 274). There was one of several calls that framed the development of teacher education content and pedagogies that connect teacher candidates regularly and directly with practice (see also McDonald et al., 2013; McDonald et al., 2014). The practice-based teacher education literature fairly exploded as scholars and teacher educators developed ideas about content and pedagogies that would allow teacher educators to situate practice centrally in preparing teachers. Teacher educators, including myself and others at my institution, undertook efforts to feature school-embedded semesters and incorporate pedagogical features such as video study, microteaching, and rehearsal. Yet these efforts were generally situated in specific courses,

led by individual faculty members, and considered additions to the university-based curriculum, while teacher candidates continued to log state-required hours in P-12 classrooms as their “field experience.” This spotty attention to “practice,” while continuing to cling to time-honored requirements, stands in contrast to the recent report of the Clinical Practice Commission (AACTE, 2018), which re-emphasized the need for clinical practice. The Commission called for systematic focus on clinical practice (with consideration for each local context), with strategic attention to the content we want novices to learn, the language we use to work on teaching and with teachers, and the range of robust partnerships that will facilitate new teachers’ learning.

Facing the reality that formats for P-12 schooling and higher education will continue to be modified throughout the 2020-21 academic year, the argument for systemic work on practice-based teacher education is worth revisiting with some urgency. This is the moment to stop dabbling in practice-based content and pedagogies and to recognize – to leverage – *as field experience* opportunities for teacher candidates to work on learning teaching practice within and across the semesters of their programs. Comprehensive revisions of teacher education curriculum (see, e.g., TeachingWorks’ practice-based teacher education) are unlikely in the tight timeframe presented by the current crisis. But certain changes, if applied across programs, could provide meaningful “practice-based field experience” that offsets, and even upgrades, the limits of traditional field experience during the pandemic and beyond.

There are two needed prongs of this conversation: the *what* and the *how*. First, what is the specific content we want novices to learn in field experience? Guided by the conception of practice described above, I argue for a focus on what we might call essential instructional routines, especially those that engage P-12 students with rigor and can be used flexibly to teach important content. This aligns with what Lampert and Graziani (2009) called “instructional activities”: routines for teaching that specify consistent, well-defined outlines of interaction among teacher, students, and important content to be learned. A novice teacher can learn to execute readily what is consistent in the interaction, which then allows her to focus on being responsive to what is less predictable – student behaviors and ideas related to the content under study (what Lampert and colleagues term the “performative aspects” of a teaching routine [Lampert et al., 2010]). Further, as teacher candidates learn the whole of an essential instructional routine, they can also gain skill with embedded components (e.g., modeling, representing, questioning, paraphrasing) that are part of other instructional routines.

So what are the essential instructional routines that can be the focus of practice-based field experience? Our urgently needed conversations about the *what* must address: Which essential instructional routines must novice teachers be equipped to use to teach within their content areas? What are the crucial components that make up these routines? What connections or commonalities exist across the routines and/or their components, which would inform their organization across courses and programs? Considerations of equity, content area demands, emphasis on rigor, and degree of alignment with current P-12 school practices should underpin these conversations. This last point cannot be overstated: these essential instructional routines should align with what teacher candidates will encounter and be expected to use whenever they are able to work in the P-12 classrooms that partner with the teacher education programs. The routines agreed upon as essential for a given program should be few in number and maximally flexible for use with a range of subject matter and instructional settings.

The second prong of needed conversations involves *how* teacher candidates will engage with practice – that is, the form of the field experience. Practice as described above – its conceptualization as active, involving understanding, social, routinized, and contextual – points toward a range of possible pedagogies that enable teacher candidates to engage with teaching in structured, purposeful ways. Rozelle and Wilson (2012), drawing on Korthagen’s (2004) “onion model” of levels of change from external behaviors to internal beliefs, describe a kind of a trajectory of skillfulness that can develop through P-12 classroom-based field experiences, as teacher candidates move from close mimicry of their P-12 mentors’ lessons to more nimble reproduction of the P-12 mentors’ instructional patterns underpinned by a developing vision of good teaching. This trajectory can help inform program-level selection of pedagogies for practice-based field experience, as we can anticipate (and support) a transition from initial mechanical performance of selected essential instructional routines to more flexible, responsive use over time. Because alignment with the P-12 teaching context is a criterion for the selection of instructional routines, teacher candidates may then enact the practice in the P-12 classroom when and if a traditional field experience setting allows.

What, then, are teacher education pedagogies that can facilitate teacher candidates’ transition through the “trajectory of skillfulness” just described? I propose three stages with particular pedagogies functioning within each, which can be applied across a teacher education program as teacher candidates’ practice-based field experience. These stages move them toward sophisticated, responsive capability with each well-defined instructional routine. The first stage provides relative “safety” as the teacher candidates intensively study the instructional routine, the second stage moves them into practical use in a lower-risk, supportive environment, and the third stage transitions to full performance of the instructional routine in a somewhat more complex environment. Throughout the three stages, the teacher educator provides continual support and feedback.

### **Stage 1**

To begin with fairly risk-free but intensive study of the instructional routine, a teacher educator could use structured video study that enables teacher candidates to examine the outlines of an instructional routine, the demands on teacher and students, and the components of the instructional routine that are planned versus responsive. The approach aligns with the use of video cases for “video modeling”: the focus is on providing a clear example to heighten teacher candidates’ recognition of the underlying organization within the instructional routine (Masats & Doolley, 2011). After they watch the video, teacher candidates collaboratively engage in a backward mapping task – revisiting the video as needed – to create a plan that the teacher in the video might have followed. These plans are the focus of teacher educator-facilitated discussion that elicits noteworthy features of the instructional routine, highlights its complexity, and anticipates points of caution for both teacher and students within the instructional routine. Notably, this pedagogy is robust, time-intensive, collaborative, and highly guided, which aligns with Kang and Van Es’ (2019) “principled use of video framework.”

## Stage 2

To advance the teacher candidates’ ability to use the routine, a teacher educator might then use a pair of pedagogies that move into enactment, but in a fairly low-risk setting: peer co-planning for use of the instructional routine followed by coached rehearsal among a larger group of peers. The literature emphasizes co-planning – that is, collaborative work to prepare for instruction – as vital in the relationship of general educator and special educator as co-teachers in the same classroom (Pratt et al., 2017) and also beneficial as a productive activity between mentor teachers and teacher candidates (Pylman, 2016). The practice-based teacher education literature mentions planning as necessary before use of pedagogies like rehearsal (e.g., Kazemi et al., 2009), but the notion of robust co-planning between teacher candidates is largely unmentioned. Yet well-structured co-planning between teacher candidates, in preparation for rehearsal, can allow teacher candidates to draw on the benefits noted in the literature: they can share different perspectives on content and anticipate potential challenges across diverse students, and in doing so, articulate not just the “how” of teaching but the “why” (Pylman, 2016). In Stage 2, using the outline of the backward mapping task in Stage 1, teacher candidates can work in pairs to co-plan a new lesson involving the essential instructional routine under study.

After co-planning, the teacher educator can use coached rehearsals as teacher candidates teach their planned lessons to a small group of peers. In a coached rehearsal, a teacher candidate takes on the role of teacher, enacting her plan for using the instructional routine, while the other teacher candidates take the role of students and the teacher educator acts as coach (Lampert et al., 2013). The goal for any particular rehearsal is not perfect execution, but to provide supported practice with the instructional routine for the “teacher,” and to use the teaching of the instructional routine as a kind of text that can be examined, interpreted, and analyzed by the other teacher candidates. The teacher educator thus interjects into the teaching at various points: to suggest productive next moves or revisions to moves just made; to query the other teacher candidates about how students might respond at a certain point or why specific moves are effective; or to illuminate reasons behind particular teacher choices and effects on the students (Pfaff, 2017). Pfaff notes that teacher educators should vary the focus in any given rehearsal – for example, to highlight the overall structure of the routine, to examine word choice, or to attend to the function of a particular feature of the routine. In this way, repeated rehearsals among the group of teacher candidates advance understanding of the overall instructional routine as well as its responsive, less predictable elements.

## Stage 3

Finally, to move teacher candidates into skillful independence with the instructional routine, a teacher educator might then utilize microteaching. Once critiqued for its limited focus on the demonstration of discrete teaching behaviors, the more current literature on microteaching emphasizes a more complex approach that exposes teachers’ thinking and judgement in tandem with the performative aspects of teaching (Karlström & Hamza, 2019; Zhang & Cheng, 2011) and affords opportunities for reflection (Amobi, 2005). In microteaching, teacher candidates can engage in planning of a lesson involving the essential instructional routine followed by teaching the lesson to a “class” composed of peers. The teacher candidate then receives collegial feedback from peers and finally engages in reflection (verbal, written, or both) about what was learned

through the planning/teaching/feedback experience. In Stage 3, teacher candidates are more independent with the essential instructional routine, as they plan on their own, teach without interruption, and engage in a public, collegial debriefing about what was observed and experienced during the teaching. In the debriefing, the teacher educator can facilitate the discussion to focus less on the structure of the instructional routine – which should be well-known because of Stages 1 and 2 – and emphasize the reasoning underpinning the teacher’s choices related to its less-predictable, responsive elements.

This discussion of *what* practice-based field experience should entail and *how* practice-based field experience should be structured is intended as a starting point. Research is needed to move the notion of practice-based field experience from the outlines set forth here to a more robust set of recommendations that could inform program-level change. First, how must the existing teacher education curriculum be modified for practice-based field experience? The goal is not to “make room” for essential instructional routines and the three stages described above, but to determine how teacher candidates’ structured learning of carefully selected essential instructional routines simultaneously enables their learning of what we have traditionally slotted as “coursework.” Notably, these changes need to occur not within individual courses, but with coherence and commitment across programs. Second, what are the demands of practice-based field experience on the teacher educator, and how do we ensure that teacher educators are equipped to meet those demands? The significant collaboration required to integrate practice-based field experience at the program level, use of pedagogies that position the teacher educator as coach, and the potential challenge of implementing practice-based field experience in virtual settings (i.e., via Zoom) hint at the complex nature of necessary changes to the teacher educator’s role. Finally, as we hopefully move into a post-pandemic period that allows teacher candidates to return to more “normal” work in P-12 schools, research must examine: How does their work with practice-based field experience influence teacher candidates’ engagement in traditional field experiences? In what aspects of teaching are they adequately prepared, and in what aspects are they less so?

### Conclusion

The revision of field experience suggested here is neither simple nor quick, but in light of uncertain circumstances for preparing new teachers now and in the coming semesters, it is essential. Note that this is not a suggestion to simply reframe what many of us are already doing in terms of practice-based efforts. Practice-based field experience requires intentional design within and across semesters of a program with the goal of fully equipping those teacher candidates for work in P-12 classrooms, regardless of what current opportunities they have in P-12 classrooms. That said, note also that this argument is not meant to dismiss the P-12 classroom experiences that are possible for teacher candidates in the pandemic period. We must continue to work with school-based clinical educators to negotiate the types of opportunities for observation and teaching that are possible for teacher candidates – whether these are of the more typical whole class face-to-face variety, virtual meetings with whole classes and/or small groups of students, or moderating individual students’ online or in-person work on tasks and assignments. School-based clinical educators must also provide crucial insight into the selection of essential instructional routines and resources for learning them that have resonance in P-12 schools.

Further waivers of field experience hours will allow teacher candidates to progress toward graduation but will not ensure that they are prepared to engage in the active, social, routinized, judgment-driven practice of teaching. In this pandemic moment, we teacher educators have an opportunity – not only to bridge this temporary gap with practice-based alternatives to traditional field experience, but to actually revise the teacher education curriculum in a lasting, meaningful way.

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