

Vexations and Breakthroughs

Taking an In-Person Tutoring Program Online

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Abstract

In March, our on-campus tutoring program for credential candidates and local students was shut down by the pandemic. This signature program had served families and the community for many years and provided essential fieldwork experience for credential candidates in our elementary and secondary reading methods courses. Most importantly, it provided a developmental understanding of literacy practices within a supportive coaching environment. Due to Covid-19, we needed to transition from in-person to online instruction, and we were vexed. Adapting this microteaching clinical/fieldwork experience to an online setting required four strategies: redesigning the tutoring program's structure; engaging closely with families; diving into online training; and practicing self-compassion.

Keywords: preservice teacher education, literacy, tutoring, fieldwork, community of practice

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The world as we shape it, and our experience as the world shapes it, are like the mountain and the river. They shape each other, but they have their own shape....They cannot be transformed into each other, yet they transform each other. The river only carves and the mountain only guides, yet in their interaction, the carving becomes the guiding and the guiding becomes the carving.

—Etienne Wenger, 1998, p. 71

Disquisition

Moments of Panic

“Impossible” was the word that ran through my mind the second week of teaching an online summer reading methods course. It was the twelfth week of California’s Covid-19 stay-at-home order.

Not all of my credential students had reliable Internet connection or access to home printers, and my technological skills needed help. A smartphone, jury-rigged as a document camera, was not working. The text was appearing in reverse on the graduate students’ computer screens. The next day my hard drive would crash.

So much had I valorized face-to-face education and hands-on experiences—a hallmark of my university—that I was unprepared for the digital revolution and its potential in and outside the classroom. But the world was now socially distanced, and I had a class to teach.

For the last 13 years, I have taught a reading methods course, working side-by-side with credential candidates, during their fieldwork experience with elementary-grade tutees. Now, as the coordinator of our reading center and course instructor, I had to turn the intimate act of tutoring into a remote learning experience. To “meet the moment” my teacher education team and I developed new guidelines, revised tutoring schedules, researched digital text resources, and hired fieldwork supervisors experienced in remote instruction.

Some of our solutions raised new questions. For example, mindful of children’s screen-time capacity, we reduced our hour-and-a-half tutoring sessions to 40 minutes. We then wondered how our teaching credential candidates would administer written literacy assessments, teach comprehension strategies, problem-solve unfamiliar words, or engage in the writing process in less than half the time regularly allotted for tutoring. Moreover, as a computer monitor became our classroom, we worried over how we could still engage in “kid-watching” (Goodman, 1985), looking for clues of a child’s confusion and those precious “a-ha” moments of learning.

There were also the technological hurdles. Zoom, Padlet, SeeSaw, Google Jamboard, Panopto, Pear Deck, NearPod, and EPIC digital books,

were just some of the online tools and resources that became part of my pedagogical repertoire. Our team and students rehearsed Zoom sessions, and for a moment, online tutoring looked promising.

That optimism faded, however, as I struggled with my document camera that evening. In less than a week, the tutees would arrive for ten weeks of tutoring. Knowing how important strong literacy skills are in the trajectory of children's lifelong experiences (Luke, 2003), I grew disheartened. Had I been foolishly optimistic in thinking that we could overcome the pandemic-imposed constraints on our teaching practice? Could remote tutoring build teacher-child relationships, provide credential candidates with rich fieldwork experience, or foster children's love for reading and writing?

Imagining a Remote Tutoring Program

In spite of my doubts, I knew that our teacher education program had a strong foundation. Over the years, our in-person tutoring program had been successful and provided us with the idealism and hope that we needed to address the needs of our credential candidates during the pandemic. Since 1978, Chapman University has provided literacy tutoring to children from the community at our on-campus Kathleen Muth Learning Center. The space is a destination for instructors, credential candidates in our reading methods courses, tutees and their families. We had developed a robust library with quality literature—picture books to chapter books—on topics ranging from ants to zoology, in leveled texts for each tutee's need. Our multiple subject, single subject, and special education credential candidates use the center as a space for the fieldwork component of their reading methods courses. When credential candidates first walk into the center, they know they are about to begin their journey as teachers. Surrounded by hundreds of children's books, they understand that this is the setting where they will learn how to teach a child to read and write.

The strength of the program lies in face-to-face meetings in which each tutoring dyad is directed by course instructors, reading supervisors, and a staff director in a multi-layered format providing oversight and coaching. Meaningful engagement, purposeful practices, and social belonging contribute to a collective identity of competent learners and participants in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

By the end of each semester, the credential candidates often express how developing balanced literacy instruction tailored to a child's interest (Tompkins, 2017) in a safe, positive learning environment can make a difference in the child's academic growth. Through participation and purposeful engagement (Wenger, 1998), credential candidates can see

themselves as developing teachers, and the children can view themselves as capable readers and writers. Families whose children have attended these sessions praise the personalized instruction.

But as the pandemic forced us to a new paradigm, I was vexed. Could we maintain this instructional quality online?

To answer this question, we identified three immediate challenges: finding appropriate and accessible texts and materials for our credential candidates and their tutees who were all at a distance with interactions mediated by technology; connecting with families willing to participate in this program now that it was online; and addressing the unique nature of online instruction itself. We came up with a four-step plan to: (1) redesign the tutoring program's structure, (2) engage closely with families, (3) dive into online training, and (4) practice self-compassion, which we learned along the way.

Dispatch

"Astonishing" was the word that ran through my mind the third week of the semester as I watched our credential candidates instruct their tutees over Zoom. With the initial computer problems solved (new document camera purchased, computer repaired), I made sure the credential candidates received printed copies of literacy assessments that they could annotate. I also mailed tutees' families the reading passages that their children were expected to read. This early success was logistical and the result of our initial planning. But there was more. We made key changes to several aspects of the program based upon our four-step plan, described below.

Redesign Tutoring Program's Structure

Providing digital text resources to credential candidates. Having lost access to the Kathleen Muth Literacy Center's library, we needed a virtual library. One of our first steps was to identify and vet digital literacy resources that would not only support credential candidates' lesson-plan writing but also engage tutees. We were fortunate, in early spring, when school districts and universities shifted to remote teaching, a vast number of Internet resources were made available for educators to draw upon. By taking the rare step of easing copyrights, publishers were now providing educators, students, and their families access to these materials, but I knew the availability of Internet resources would be overwhelming for novice educators to sift through.

After watching several webinars, talking to classroom teachers, and enlisting the support of a graduate research assistant, I compiled a 32-

page list of digital literacy resources. I then analyzed the list, and after getting recommendations from classroom teachers, I winnowed it down to two essential sources, ReadWorks and Renaissance. Both were free to educators and families and provided a range of texts and genres at varied reading levels. I asked the credential candidates to practice with these resources and invited them to expand their knowledge and select from the 32-page list of additional digital resources. To scaffold their decision-making, I categorized the list and placed the most frequently educator-cited resources on the first two pages, as well as recommended long-established and well-regarded resources such as the websites, *Time for Kids* and *National Geographic Kids* (these became the most popular among credential candidates).

Selecting a new literacy project. In the past, our tutoring program focused on children becoming authors of their own books. This allowed us to address the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts' requirement for reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Now we needed a digital equivalent. In my research, I realized that we could adapt a "Passion Project" (Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, 2020) that provided for meaningful student choice and purposeful inquiry. This research activity would incorporate reading and writing based on a child's topic of interest. The format would not be a book but a digital literacy artifact in the form of Google Slides, Canva, Padlet or a written essay.

The research Passion Project helped us manage our instructional time so that we could accomplish our academic goals in the 40-minute tutoring timeframe. The projects incorporated informational texts, integrated multi-modal texts such as videos and audio files, used the writing process for tutees to record their learning, and incorporated word study. Midway through tutoring, our credential students identified how the Passion Project aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) goals for developing expert learners (CAST, 2018). At the end-of-semester's tutoring Literacy Celebration, when children proudly presented their Passion Projects in small groups, we knew we had been successful.

Putting books into the hands of children. Once we started tutoring, we realized that some digital texts were challenging for children to read on their computer, tablet, or smartphone. We were fortunate to have a grant to purchase and deliver literature books to some tutees as well as their university tutor, so they could engage in shared reading. While not every program can draw upon a grant, programs might choose to apply a small course fee to handle materials.

Further possibilities. Other steps we are planning for the fall include: (1) finding digital literature chapter books to form small book clubs in a reading workshop format; (2) finding authentic literacy assessments that can easily be administered remotely; and (3) creating “tutoring kits” with paper copies of selected hands-on teaching materials and literacy assessments that can be picked-up on campus (or mailed) at the beginning of the semester.

Engage Closely with Families

Forefronting family needs. I realized that many families—tutees, credential candidates and university faculty—were juggling the demands of their daily lives amid the constraints of the pandemic. Thus, tutoring had to be an effortless, engaging, and enjoyable experience for everyone. This understanding helped emphasize the importance of building relationships and selecting a Passion Project that would motivate the children to participate.

Purposeful recruitment. Because this was our first experience with online instruction, we selected families who had a prior relationship with the reading center and understood its requirements. We needed families who would be willing to commit their child’s time and welcome us into their homes through Zoom. We also took a tip from a colleague at another university and chose upper elementary students who were likely to have computer screen stamina. Most importantly, families needed Internet access.

Establishing program’s usefulness. At one point, we noticed that some tutees’ families missed their online sessions. Their lives were no longer defined by the usual routine of driving their child to and from campus. We had to find new ways of communicating more frequently with them. Our staff director emailed reminders each week, and we sent out a weekly family newsletter with brief literacy tips and highlights.

Further possibilities. With the summer session successfully completed, we plan to expand to include primary grade children. We will invest time researching developmentally appropriate instructional techniques for this younger age group.

Dive into Online Training

In spring 2020, online training and collaboration webinars seemed to appear everywhere. While I eagerly sought ideas wherever I could, I invested my time in two areas:

Reactivating networks. For advice on starting up a remote tutoring program, I reached out to a nationwide group of literacy educators, part of the Literacy Research Association. I met with some of the members of its Reading Clinics/Literacy Labs group through Zoom, and we exchanged ideas and made suggestions for fine-tuning our respective work. I was grateful to know that I was not alone with my apprehension and hope for our own summer program.

Educators and researchers. I enrolled in a series of webinars taught by classroom teachers/facilitators through Teachers College Reading and Writing Project and prominent literacy researchers, such as Nell K. Duke. They provided concrete modeling of remote teaching literacy practices, such as reading workshop, shared writing, interactive writing, Making Words, and writing conferences. Until now, I had firmly believed these instructional practices could only be effective when taught face-to-face. As I watched these educators teach, I noticed them hesitate, struggle with children's short attention spans, and improvise in the moment. Through these adaptations and adjustments, I saw that authentic engagement between teacher and student could be imperfect and yet still, in the end, successful. Years of teaching had given them confidence in their practice even as it was challenged by remote education. Instead of being immobilized by the vagaries of the pandemic, they persisted and carved out a new space and an online path for implementing research-based practices in the classroom that used authentic reading and writing instruction. They guided me on my path to a pedagogy that I could embrace. Their creation of a virtual community of practice gave me confidence and an eagerness to participate in this new online learning community.

Further possibilities. As we broaden our online instruction in the coming year, we intend to find additional webinars specifically geared for the developmental needs of younger children as well as those for scaffolding learners with special needs. Our credential candidates will be teaching children in transitional Kindergarten-12th grades and will need to be knowledgeable in supporting all learners.

Practice Self-Compassion

My initial instinct was to create a remote learning environment that would be consistent with what I knew. I thought this meant maintaining the same rigorous standards as before, but after attending a classroom teachers' webinar in April, I recognized the need to acknowledge the extreme conditions of remote teaching. Online learning exacerbates educational inequity and lack of access (Aguilera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020); not all students have stable Internet connections or adequate

devices. Thus, we needed to learn patience and acceptance if we were to find the rhythm of remote teaching.

Taking risks. Educator Parker Palmer (2007) and other researchers (e.g., Tarrasch, Berger, & Grossman, 2020) address the role of compassion in the classroom which extends not just to students but to teachers as well. Taking a deep breath and adjusting my expectations, I realized the importance of building a relationship with children, and I reflected on the fact that all of us—higher education faculty, reading supervisors, tutors, and tutees—were pioneering a new mode of fieldwork. I remembered the risks taken by established teachers and literacy researchers who shared their own imperfections as they attempted to engage their students in authentic literacy instruction. I was humbled and accepted my vulnerability as a learner. My students witnessed my technological gaffes, and I became more at ease, acknowledging these missteps and using them as teachable moments.

Creating socio-emotional space. Our evening class began with checking in with one another and ended with an acknowledgement of what we had accomplished. Zoom chat, Google Jamboard, and Padlet captured our collective sentiments. At times, I drew upon my own meditation practice, and we took time to take in three breaths and recall our individual purpose for choosing this profession and pursuing a degree in such a difficult time.

Further possibilities. We intend to find out more about socio-emotional classroom dynamics as they relate to teaching credential candidates and children in future classrooms by tapping into the expertise of our colleagues in our school counseling/school psychologist programs as resources. We want to create more frequent virtual student and faculty gatherings throughout our teacher education programs to cultivate camaraderie and community.

It's Working

“Rewarding” was the consensus of the credential candidates at the end of the summer session. They were initially doubtful that 40-minute online tutoring sessions could be effective, but after observing their tutees’ academic growth and final projects, the credential candidates saw first-hand that the program was successful, and they were developing as teachers. We managed to do this in our Zoom sessions when we recalled that “meaning exists neither in us nor the world, but in the dynamic relation of living in the world” (Wenger, 1998, p. 54). Together, we discovered that we could create an online learning environment invigorated with purpose and engagement.

During ten weeks of tutoring sessions, I moved in and out of Zoom meeting rooms and observed credential candidates guide their tutees through research, reading, writing, vocabulary, and phonics instruction. With their research Passion Projects, children pursued topics they were interested in. I watched when a fourth grader, brimming with motivation and readiness, grabbed a piece of paper to write about his basketball topic and announced to his tutor, “I can give you five paragraphs.” At the end of one fifth grader’s lesson, when advised that there were only a couple minutes left to write about his research topic on volcanos, the child reacted incredulously: “Already?” In another session, I listened as a third-grade emergent bilingual child eagerly tackled new vocabulary words such as “gills,” “cartilage,” and “caudle fin,” while researching sharks. At the end of the tutoring program, a child declared, “I want to make a book. I have the script all in my head.” These children’s comments would make any educator happy. They are signals of students’ deep engagement in their learning when they have choice in pursuing their interests (Tompkins, 2017). And we had accomplished it online, in the middle of a global pandemic.

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Appendix

Professional Associations and Resources Referenced

Literacy Research Association, Innovative Community Group—Reading Clinics/ Literacy Labs

<https://www.literacyresearchassociation.org/reading-clinic-literacy-labs>

Nell K. Duke (2020) Small Group Literacy Instruction at a Distance

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNHImv_iKEM

Nell K. Duke (2020) Word Work at a Distance

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFsKu7rf8_I

Kristin Neff (2020). Self-Compassion for Educators, Center for Mindful Self-Compassion.

Fee based course: <https://centerformsc.org/self-compassion-educators/>

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project—Virtual Learning Resources

<https://readingandwritingproject.org/virtualllearning>

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project—Passion Project

<https://readingandwritingproject.org/virtualllearning/micro-workshops>

Digital Text Resources cited:

ReadWorks (Grades K-12)

<https://www.readworks.org/>

Renaissance myOn (Grades K-8)

<https://www.myon.com/index.html>

National Geographic Kids

<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/>

Time for Kids

<https://www.timeforkids.com/>