Finalizing Teacher Education Capstone Projects in an Unstable Environment

Three Strategies for Success

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced all levels of education, including higher education. School closures have impacted teacher credentialing course work, research projects, assessments, and student teaching placements. The challenges currently facing teacher candidates necessitate a review of how we support their needs for connection, support, and relevant course content as they advance to becoming credentialed teachers. To meet these needs, I suggest building on existing practices to complete capstone research projects in distance learning contexts, developing unstructured social spaces through social media platforms, and inviting teacher candidates to co-curate course content.

Disquisition

When the Covid-19 stay-at-home order was mandated, I was teaching two sections of the same masters-level Educational Research Methods course at a private university in southern California. This course supports a capstone assignment that includes a traditional research project and corresponding paper. In addition to research, teacher candidates

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carry a heavy load; they serve as student teachers in a full-time placement, manage research in the field, and take supplementary courses. At this point in the master's program, I was fortunate to know my teacher candidates well. For many of them, I had been supporting their research efforts since fall 2019, and I was familiar with their interests, methods, and work ethic. The program's cohort model, in addition to the intense course load, lent itself to a "familial" or "fraternal" feel. I was as much mentor as instructor, and deep friendships between candidates evolved over the weeks and months they spent together.

By March, many of my teacher candidates were well into their capstone projects and were at different phases of research design, action research implementation, or data collection. Yet, as the news of school closures and the spread of Covid-19 loomed on the horizon, many of them began to realize that they might not see or have consistent access to their research participants again. Thus, when the final word of official school closures circulated on Friday, March 13th, many scrambled to make copies of IEP assessments, finish lesson implementation, and conduct final interviews. With their student teaching experience cut short, a few were able to finish their data collection with some level of authenticity, but many did not. Those that did not finish were coached on what could be conducted and collected through remote means or asked to change their research method to a Curriculum Research Project, a capstone project traditionally less popular among teacher candidates because it doesn't involve much interaction with students or traditional data collection.

These changes, coupled with high levels of uncertainty, caused extreme stress for my teacher candidates. They voiced their frustrations about conducting research that was not designed for the distance learning format and expressed disillusionment with having to change their research designs so close to the deadline. Moreover, many of them still needed to meet Commission on Teacher Credentialing expectations for fieldwork and had not yet passed the state-mandated assessments, including the RICA or CSET, nor had they met the CalTPA requirements. The cold fact that they could not return to their school placements to tie up loose ends left many candidates stunned and immobilized. In my rush to problem solve their new reality, I implemented critical shifts in the curriculum and my instruction that supported my teacher candidates' success with their capstone projects and course completion.

The Shift to Distance Learning

Once the schools closed and it was determined that the teacher candidates would not be returning to their school sites, I put into place

three effective practices that proved to be critical in supporting candidate program completion. First, I met with each of my candidates for one-on-one Zoom meetings. During these meetings, I created a spreadsheet for each candidate and took inventory of their credentialing status, capstone project progress, and student teaching hours. These one-on-one meetings served as an anchor for the candidates during a time of much anxiety and many unknowns. Additionally, the spreadsheet helped me keep track of all 26 of my candidates and their different needs and requirements and helped determine if candidates needed to change their research method or stay the course. Meetings ended with action plans and new timelines to support the remainder of each candidate's coursework.

Second, once we reaffirmed or modified their research designs, I put the teacher candidates into small groups of no more than six, based on their particular research method. For the rest of our class sessions, I met with each group for 90 minutes and assisted in data analysis, taught (new) research methods, and deconstructed capstone paper requirements. This small group format served the candidates by allowing them to gain research knowledge through a collaborative group environment and to solve research problems with their peers.

Finally, I continued to meet with several of my teacher candidates on a biweekly and sometimes daily basis. In particular, I had four teacher candidates that struggled significantly during this time who seemed to need my constant reassurance as they moved through the final stages of their research. It appeared that the stay-at-home order due to Covid-19 left them anxious, mentally cloudy, and emotionally drained. Although several pushed everything back until the last minute as they grappled with the effects of the global pandemic, I can report that all 26 of my candidates met the requirements for their capstone project and ultimately graduated from the program.

Although these initial shifts proved to be effective, I quickly realized that there was a clear, unspoken candidate need that also demanded my attention and had to be addressed; my teacher candidates yearned for student and faculty connection. Many were struggling with the Covid-19 orders for staying home; they felt isolated, unmotivated, and overwhelmed. More importantly, they missed the interaction of brick-and-mortar classrooms. Zoom was a sufficient alternative, but they expressed grief over missing the consequential interactions that occur in the hallways or after class when meeting in person. They lamented the loss of family travel and celebrations related to their now elusive graduation. Essentially, they were being asked to finish their coursework under more challenging circumstances, but with less support from their peers, family, and faculty.

The Current Social Political Climate

The heavy cloud of Covid-19 that hung over the teacher candidates' final semester and graduation was further embittered by our current sociopolitical climate. Arguably difficult for all Americans to witness (Parker, Horowitz, & Anderson, 2020), the pandemic showcased additional inequities that teacher candidates of Color have long had to manage. For example, communities of Color experience higher rates of Covid-19 contractions and fatalities. American Indians, Alaskan Native, and Black populations are five times as likely, and Latinx communities are four times as likely to contract the coronavirus than their White counterparts (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). An additional long-standing inequity was made more visible when the pandemic forced all coursework online. Digital access, or lack thereof, further exacerbated the "digital divide" between teacher candidates of Color and their White peers (Fairlie, 2014). In higher education alone, teacher candidates of Color are less likely to have access to a technological device or working internet. (Sims, Vidgen, & Philip, 2008). Finally, higher Covid-19 contractions and digital access issues pale in comparison to the relative blatant racism that Black Americans experience at the hand of American institutions of power. Police violence against the Black community and communities of Color has been a constant for decades (Gamal, 2016). The most recent killing of Black Americans has affirmed that we continue to live in a society where racial inequality persists unabated (Kendi, 2020). These recent events call into question all institutions charged with shaping young minds, including higher education. As teacher educators, we must adopt the perspective that our teacher candidates, and especially our teacher candidates of Color, have likely experienced the events outlined above to different degrees. It is imperative that the courses and curriculum we develop to meet current student needs within the digital learning context include relevant content and support teacher candidate connection in ways that recognize and value all our candidates.

Dispatch

The instructional shifts that I put into place were essential for my teacher candidates' success, yet more than anything my teacher candidates pined for human connection. I am aware, however, that we must balance candidate social and emotional needs with the demands and purposes of teacher education—graduating qualified and effective teachers to work with our students. Thus below, I offer three strategies to foster student relationships while also meeting program requirements.

They include preparing for future curriculum shifts, reimagining social spaces through social media, and co-curating course content.

Preparing for Future Curriculum Shifts

We were fortunate in that there were three components of our capstone course already in place that facilitated supporting our candidates through pandemic challenges. First, we had a genuine capstone option that did not require a school placement: the Curriculum Research Project. Originally created to serve those who wanted a master's in education without a teaching credential, the Curriculum Research Project includes standard research components (i.e., a literature review, data collection, and research reflection), as well as a ten-lesson curriculum package. Data collection requirements are met using data derived from student work collected after the instruction of two curriculum lessons. During the pandemic, teacher candidates were asked to teach two of their lessons to a small group of peers, experts from the K-12 community, and university leadership, in order to generate data in the form of responses to their instruction. Having the Curriculum Research Project capstone option in place (pre-pandemic) positioned our program to address urgent curriculum shifts with a certain level of nimbleness that ultimately supported our candidates.

Second, we had recently modified the capstone requirement project so that it emphasized three methods only: case study, action research, and curriculum research design. In this process we also decided to streamline the rubric and capstone paper structure to be consistent across all three methodologies. For example, all three methods and corresponding papers start out with a statement of the problem, context presentation, and an understanding of the research gap, before a review of the literature is presented. Parallel requirements established a process that was designed to ease anxieties as candidates moved from one rubric to another.

Finally, embedded within the course were ample opportunities for capstone project peer review and collaboration. Having the teacher candidates read and respond to their peers served two purposes. First, peer review created shared knowledge of course expectations and capstone requirements. Second, it built teacher candidate connection through the support and coaching teacher candidates received from each other. This aspect of the program became more important as teacher candidates were asked to shift their research focus midsemester. Some teacher candidates were able to pivot more readily than others and having peer models encouraged efficacy among teacher candidates as they advanced towards project completion.

Reimagining Social Spaces Through Social Media

When I asked my candidates from spring semester about the most challenging part of the quarantine, their responses indicated that they struggled with social isolation and the subsequent lack of motivation to finish their coursework. They mentioned missing the unstructured social encounters of in-person teaching. My unconventional solution for creating an unstructured social space for future distance learning would be to use the social structures that are available, namely social media. Social media platforms are ideal for creating unstructured social spaces because they are widely used among our teacher candidate population, can foster online relationships, and support "social presence and communication," among students (Chuang, 2016, p. 867). Additionally, social media can be constructed to sustain a small circle of participants and include features that support categorization and student response through hashtags (e.g., #EDTE515) and name handles (i.e., @dr.michel_coaches). With a multitude of social media platforms available, I chose Instagram because of its visual attributes, my familiarity with the application, and its saturated presence for new teacher support.

To get started, teacher candidates might maintain their current account or create an additional Instagram account to post pictures as weekly reflections. The Instagram prompts could begin as group-building exercises and then move to interaction with text related to research, teaching, or social justice themes. For example:

> Week One: *Why did you choose the teaching profession?* Post a picture that symbolizes why you made this choice and include a description in the heading section. Hashtag your response with #EDTE514purpose.

> Week Two: *What topic most resonated with you in your review of pertinent research?* Post a quote from the literature and cite your source (APA). In the caption explain why this quote resonated with you. Hashtag your response with #EDTE514litreview.

> Week Five: After reading, *Dear White Teacher by Chrysanthius Lathan, select a quote from the text that challenged one of your beliefs about education*. Create a visual post that represents your belief and includes the quote. Add an explanation of why you felt challenged in the caption section. Hashtag your response with #EDTE514_DWT.

As a follow-up exercise, teacher candidates can respond to one or two classmates' posts by searching the specific hashtag associated with each prompt. Outside of class prompts and required posts, I intend to encourage teacher candidates to post other aspects of their instruction in an effort to support their evolving teacher identity.

Social media, and Instagram in particular, simulates typical student

interactions that might happen during an in-person course located on campus. Using Instagram not only addresses the need for social interaction and course group building, it also supports teacher candidate identity development and growth in relation to their research. For instance, when candidates post a visual of how they conceptualize their research efforts, they are encouraged to consider their research in abstract or expansive terms. Thinking abstractly will ultimately assist teacher candidates as they move from concrete thinking to the complexities embedded in most educational research efforts.

Co-curation of Course Content

Co-curation or "co-constructing," of course content is the notion that both the professor and teacher candidate have valuable, relevant content to offer based on their experience or knowledge (Baumgartner, Bay, Lopez-Reyna, Snowden, & Maiorano, 2015). The co-curation between instructor and teacher candidate of course content serves three purposes: it capitalizes on student voice; supports student asset building; and honors student personal experience (Baumgartner et al., 2015). Some examples for co-curating curriculum with teacher candidates include:

1. Survey teacher candidates to determine their specific interest in education and select curricula that correspond to those interests.

2. Include an assignment that requests candidates to recommend literature grounded in their interest for further class consumption.

3. Invite guest speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to present virtually in class about their own educational experiences.

4. Make connections to candidates' linguistic and cultural experiences through course examples, assigned texts, and models that reflect student life experience. (Baumgartner et al., 2015)

This level of student involvement further supports the development of our teacher candidates as professional educators, as outlined in the California Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs). Drawing on student assets and personal experiences to shape curriculum is supported in TPE 1: Engaging and Supporting all Students in Learning and TPE 4: Planning Instruction and Designing Learning Experiences for All Students (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CCTC], 2016). Modeling these kinds of inclusive, asset-driven teaching strategies are critical because they serve as formative examples as our teacher candidates develop their own teaching practice.

Conclusion

Whenever we experience a crisis there is an opportunity to learn something about ourselves and our particular circumstances. The Covid-19 pandemic has presented us with the opportunity to reflect on department and program improvements while also preparing for remote learning within an indefinite time frame. The strategies outlined above account for teacher education in its current state of ambiguity and uncertainty. As we move forward, it is clear that we must make instructional shifts in ways that re-envision our courses to afford our candidates the most success possible. Additionally, building and maintaining relationships with teacher candidates, inviting them to play an active role in their own education, and recognizing the socio-political climate they are currently maneuvering are all crucial attributes of good pedagogy. These are trying times for everyone, but especially for our novice teachers. More than ever, teacher candidates are looking to teacher educators to model good practice, acknowledge their current challenges, and provide them with a high impact and quality educational experience.

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