Building Partnerships to Support Teachers With Distance Learning During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Cohorts, Confidence, and Microteaching

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Abstract

Seven weeks into the spring semester, we were learning what it means to build community in our online classes and then, our lives quickly and drastically changed. School districts shuttered their doors in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and K-12 teachers moved to distance learning. This was a challenging moment for our school systems and many teachers and parents felt understandably overwhelmed. This narrative describes how two teacher educators partnered with a local county office of education to launch a professional development series to support K-12 teachers with virtual learning. We learned that building partnerships and proactively addressing educators' needs through a microlearning model of professional development helped teachers feel confident in this new remote learning environment.

Introduction

In March of 2020, our personal and professional lives changed drastically in response to the Covid-19 pandemic as educational institutions

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around the world closed physical campuses and instruction moved online. This seemingly overnight transition required teacher education to adapt and transition abruptly to virtual teaching; teachers had a matter of days to restructure, with little time for training and practicing relevant skills with their students. Both preservice and in-service teachers that participated in an April 2020 virtual learning workshop with us described feeling "underprepared" and/or lacking the "resources," "training and experiences" necessary for teaching in online settings. This swift transition was particularly overwhelming for the veteran in-service teachers in our community who were tasked with familiarizing themselves quickly with the wide landscape of educational technology options. Fundamentally, preservice and in-service teachers needed support to build confidence in their abilities to facilitate remote learning.

The call for increasing implementation of technology in K-12 schools is not new. Prior to the pandemic, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) included technology standards and required educators to use the internet as a resource for planning curricula. Many state standards went even further and require integrating technology and providing evidence that students demonstrate proficiency using technology tools. Supporting these mandates, several studies indicate that effective technology implementation has a positive impact on student learning (Truesdell & Birch, 2013).

Yet a significant challenge for effective implementatio—even with the inclusion of technology in state standards—continues to be a lack of adequate teacher training and support. According to Seward and Nguyen (2019), many classrooms "have computers, projectors, document cameras, and smart boards, but meaningful use of these tools depends on the instructor's familiarity and comfort with technology" (p. 80). In other words, access to relevant tools is essential, but ongoing support must be provided for both preservice and in-service teachers to assure effective implementation in the classroom. Based on our experience as teacher educators, such support from teacher education programs should focus on teachers' familiarization and comfort levels.

In the following sections, the authors describe a spring 2020 professional development project that supported preservice and in-service teachers with the swift transition to distance learning in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Below, the authors use "educators" to describe a group of nearly 200 K-12 teachers and support staff employed at local public, independent, and charter schools who participated in professional development workshops facilitated by the authors. The term "community partner" is used throughout to refer to representatives employed by the local county office of education who collaborated with the authors to create

the professional development sessions. "Virtual teaching" is synonymous with "distance teaching" and "online teaching," and refers to pedagogical practices occurring outside physical classrooms, using the internet and available technology. The term "digital literacy" refers to an ability to use technology tools to locate, analyze, and communicate information (Borthwick & Hansen, 2017; Lankshear, & Knobe, 2015; Trust, 2017). Finally, microlearning, a model of e-learning instructional design (Kerres, 2007), is an "emerging paradigm that addresses a learner's need to receive the information they need, when they need it, and in the appropriate context" (Freeman, 2016, iv.). With this project, we collaborated with our community partners to support educators with virtual teaching and digital literacy using a microlearning model of professional development.

Disquisition

In today's world, technology plays a pivotal role in the lives of youth. To effectively navigate this technology environment, teacher educators, teacher candidates, and teachers need to be digitally literate in information, media, and technology skills (IMTS) (Truesdell & Birch, 2013). Prior to the Covid pandemic, our Department of Education recognized this need for teaching digital literacy, which led us to develop instructional technology courses, *Using Technology in the Classroom* and *Applied Instructional Technology*, to bookend our teacher credential programs. In the first semester course, candidates learn about new instructional technologies and in the second semester course, they are required to apply the technologies while student teaching.

As professors within teacher preparation programs, prior to the global pandemic, we observed that many preservice and in-service teachers did not feel comfortable and confident with technology, so we offered three instructional technology training sessions focused on virtual learning tools for all university faculty during the 2019-2020 school year. Then, in March of 2020, our personal and professional lives changed quickly. Districts shuttered their doors in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and teachers had a matter of days to restructure, with little time for training and practicing virtual learning with their students. As the "shift hit the fan" in this moment of change and uncertainty, many teachers were overwhelmed, and the county office of education reached out to ask if we would be interested in providing training for K-12 teachers to support the move to remote learning in response to the pandemic.

In our initial meetings with the Director of Education Services at the county office of education, we learned that a continuous challenge for in-service teachers integrating technology was their low level of comfort

and familiarity with online teaching tools. Another problem was the lack of time in which in-service teachers had to learn and apply the technologies. To mitigate these challenges, we organized an online professional development series through our teacher education program and focused on microlearning. We offered small units of content intended for application paired with objectives that were accessible to learners. One of the crucial aspects of our microlearning sessions during this hectic time was that they were short and allowed teachers to accommodate virtual training into their busy schedules. In collaboration with the county office of education, we offered courses weekly and asked participants to implement the target strategies and tools in their online class and then reflect on how the knowledge fit into their learning environments (Major, & Calandrino, 2018). Given the stresses of the pandemic, we focused on providing practical tips that could be implemented immediately. The professional development series (Virtual Learning Sessions), consisted of:

- two sessions each week

- synchronous video meetings via one video conferencing platform

- micro sessions (20-30 minutes) with a narrow focus on topic

- 10 minutes of each session reserved for questions and discussion

- continuous feedback from participants (using polls, surveys, written reflections, and notes from question and discussion period)

- Continuing Education Units (CEUs) from the host university for attending sessions

- Virtual Learning Website launched to host course resources (i.e., video recording of sessions, registration and CEU paperwork, and structured reflection template)

- predictable and consistent format and schedule

Across this professional development series, we covered topics related to: using video conferencing platforms safely and securely, incorporating tools for assessing learning outcomes, and enhancing student engagement in online spaces. After observing in-service participants during virtual sessions and reading their reflections, in-service teachers revealed that they learned new skills and then implemented these innovative techniques in their classroom. In addition to discovering these techniques, we understood the importance of navigating and modifying default permissions within educational technology programs from our virtual learning experiences within the teacher education program. Thus, participants learned to address account settings to improve synchronous

learning experiences and enhance interactions among students, and between in-service teachers and students.

Proactively addressing educators' needs and developing meaningful support requires listening closely to teachers' frustrations and areas of concern. As the facilitators, we worked closely with the county office of education to develop sessions that were directly responsive to requests for support from teachers. In other words, we did not build sessions based on what we thought was needed but created the class topics collaboratively with in-service teachers. For the initial sessions, we co-planned with the Director of Education Services to select topics based on programs and applications used by teachers in the district. We made sure to schedule classes that were brief and narrowly focused, in a timeframe that was manageable for teachers, and in which they could learn bite-sized pieces (microlearning) of information that they could implement the next day. Given that teaching credential candidates arrive with varying degrees of technological expertise, integrating a highly responsive model of differentiated support holds promise for teacher preparation programs interested in supporting education technology.

Within each class meeting, we also used a free polling program to elicit feedback from participants about their level of comfort and understanding of the tool and/or strategy presented. We subsequently used these poll results alongside participants' written reflections (using Google Forms) to plan and/or revise the following courses. By incorporating polls/exit tickets (see Appendix A for sample poll questions) into each course, we were able to highlight teachers' voices and receive feedback that informed subsequent sessions. Additionally, using a predictable structure for reflections (see *Virtual Learning Reflection Sample*, in Appendix B) made it easier for teachers to participate and earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs) through the university's teacher education program. In turn, this simple structure made reviewing and grading less complicated for facilitators. Teacher education programs can utilize these types of predictable structures to guide candidates' reflections about technology implementation and provide a way for preservice teachers to request additional support as needed.

As we progressed through the series of workshops, we received positive feedback from community members. Our work with K-12 teachers was positively recognized by community media partners, specifically through a local journal and via university-sponsored newsletters and social media posts. Our partners at the local school district commented that they appreciated our quick organization of the series and, as the number of participants grew each week, stated, "I guess there is a real need for this!" In response to the ongoing need for support and training for

teachers, our community partners requested that we continue our virtual professional development model the following semester. In preparation, we are surveying teachers to determine training topics that will resonate with and provide support for in-service teachers. Virtual teaching and learning are an unprecedented experience for most teachers and students, and many teachers find themselves unprepared (lack of training and support) for the new environment (Hartshorne, et al., 2020).

Our series of microlearning workshops provided consistent, applicable lessons and practice with technology. Teachers that participated expressed that the training helped them to get through these challenging times and "be ahead of the game compared to their students." Creating this community partnership and developing responsive training ensured that K-12 teachers received virtual learning support during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dispatch

At the close of our spring workshops, we reflected together on what we learned that continues to sustain us and support teacher education during this life-changing pandemic. First, we learned there was a real need for strong partnerships with local K-12 educators in our community. We created the professional development series with 20-50 participants in mind, but nearly 200 educators participated. We also discovered that we need each other for support and that the collective energy sustains us during these uncertain times. Not only do we maximize our resources and knowledge through the creation of these collaborative partnerships and learning cohorts, but we also prioritize relationships that create positive interactions, motivating and pushing us forward.

In thinking about how this experience and new learning sustains us and the field moving forward, we generated a list of specific practices that can be implemented to support preservice and in-service teachers with this shift to online learning. These include:

- Creating community partnerships with learning cohorts to maximize collective energy.

- Designing professional development based on microlearning principles and a predictable format to support implementation and accommodate busy schedules.

- Creating a repository (i.e., website) to host all course information so participants can revisit topics and strategies.

- Utilizing free poll/survey programs to ensure equitable access for participants to provide feedback.

For this project, the university-district partnership began with initial conversations between university faculty members and representatives from the county office of education. In framing these initial conversations, it was important to provide possible workshop topics (suggested by faculty members) and then to collaboratively make decisions about these sessions, based on current K-12 educators' actual needs in the area of online teaching. Based on this experience, we suggest starting these partnerships with conversations that highlight possible areas of expertise that university faculty members bring to the table, but focus, primarily, on the support teachers need. Developing our partnership in this way allowed us to reach a large population of K-12 teachers in our community. As university partners, we then created and facilitated all training sessions and our district partners handled outreach through surveys and fliers, which provided course information, virtual session links, and registration forms. Together, we structured a program that supported the diverse needs of a broad community of K-12 teachers.

Additionally, this professional development series was based on microlearning principles and a predictable format. From survey feedback, we discovered that microlearning was a significant component of successful virtual learning environments, particularly because participating teachers could more easily integrate the short 30-minute sessions into their busy schedules. Additionally, chunking content into short lessons allowed teachers to consider specific bits of information and then readily implement target strategies into their virtual classrooms. We recommend offering microlearning sessions within a predictable format so teachers can fit professional development into their busy schedules and know what to expect. The predictable structure of our format included simple considerations, such as using the same presentation slide template (including themes, fonts, and the balance of visual and text information) for each session, and holding space for a question-and-discussion period in the final 10 minutes of every meeting to provide individualized and ongoing support for teachers.

As we launched the professional development series, we received multiple requests for Continuing Education Unit (CEU) registrations and additional information about session topics. This prompted us to create a website to host all course information. The "Virtual Learning Site" served as a valuable repository, providing participants with a point of contact for video-recorded sessions, registration information, Continuing Education Unit (CEU) forms, and reflection templates. We suggest creating a website to host resources and to use Google Forms (or a similar electronic format) to develop a reflection template that provides teachers with additional support for reflecting on technology implementation in their virtual classroom.

As a broad community of educators, we were faced with an unprecedented shift in teaching when we moved to online instruction. This teacher education/community partnership brought a wide range of stakeholders together to address teachers' varying levels of familiarity with educational technology and their limited experience instructing in virtual classrooms. The microlearning-based model of professional development (Freeman, 2016; Kerres, 2007) combined with the supplementary repository provided easily accessible content for busy educators. With this partnership and training model, we provided pragmatic advice that supports the work of teachers. In short, this experience highlighted the need for building strong virtual partnerships, embracing collective energy, and providing simple, structured training responsive to teachers' unique needs. The combination of these elements created a collaborative culture that resulted in collective professional growth which leveraged productive, widespread learning during a time of crisis.

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Appendix A

Sample Poll Questions

1. How familiar were you with (program/application) prior to today's workshop?
   a. Unfamiliar
   b. Somewhat familiar
   c. Familiar
   d. Very familiar

2. How comfortable were you with (program/application) prior to today's workshop?
   a. Uncomfortable
   b. Somewhat comfortable
   c. Comfortable
   d. Very comfortable

3. How familiar do you feel with (program/application) now?
   a. Unfamiliar
   b. Somewhat familiar
   c. Familiar
   d. Very familiar

4. How comfortable do you feel with (program/ application) now?
   a. Uncomfortable
   b. Somewhat comfortable
   c. Comfortable
   d. Very comfortable

5. How likely are you to implement this (program/application)?
   a. Not likely
   b. Somewhat likely
   c. Likely
   b. No

7. What programs or applications would you like to see addressed in future virtual learning sessions?

Appendix B

Virtual Learning Reflection Sample

During the courses, what did you learn?

How did you implement course information into your classroom?

Upon implementing in the classroom, what did you learn from your students?

Are there any areas in which you would like further support/courses?