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Reflecting on the Practicum: An Invitation to Continue the Conversation

Introduction

This special theme section was an invaluable opportunity for us, guest editors of this *CATESOL Journal* 2015 special theme issue, to promote reflection and dialogue on the practicum experience as a professional activity. As part of this exploration, we also wanted to find out more about practicum experiences in other TESOL teacher-education programs. We sent out a short questionnaire to practicum course instructors and/or TESOL program coordinators throughout California to tap into faculty perspectives on their student teachers' practicum experiences, their advice and practical insights on how to organize practicum courses, and wisdom gained through the years having taught such courses.

We provided the following as a working definition of a practicum:

A course specifically aimed at providing students with hands-on classroom practice that may include some or all of the following, observation of classes, micro-teaching, mentorship by a senior teacher, opportunities to lesson plan and teach (in front of an actual class of students), practicum supervisor observation, and ongoing reflection on the experience.

As shown below, the survey tapped into a range of topics related to the practicum, including course logistics, the historical context in which the practicum course has changed through time, insights into the impact of the practicum on teacher growth, and challenges in offering the practicum.

We would like to thank the following TESOL colleagues for sharing their contributions: John Battenburg (California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo), Sarina Chugani Molina (University of San Diego), Scott Phillabaum (San José State University), Kitty Purguson (Biola University), and Vanessa Wenzell (California State University, Dominguez Hills). Their comments and insights reflect the

diversity in practicum structure and mission, as well as some areas of collective concern.

For example, student teachers can have between 25-50 hours of hands-on classroom practice, which includes a variety of activities such as observing, tutoring, and student teaching. Exploration and discussion of these practices is fostered often through written and oral reflections and online journals. The use of simulation rooms for teaching, action research, and the development of a teaching portfolio (in preparation for employment) are noted as unique aspects in some practicum courses. Because of limited resources, such as faculty availability to supervise student teachers, some programs have had to find alternative ways to provide hands-on practice in lieu of a practicum course. In some programs practicum activities and assignments have been revised because of resources. Another challenge that programs regularly deal with is identifying mentor teachers—this can vary from recruiting mentor teachers to establishing partnerships and navigating school bureaucracies. In addition, there is the delicate relationship between mentor teachers and student teachers who have to be nurtured. Overall, however, our colleagues stated that student teachers had very positive things to say about their practicum experiences.

This informal survey scratched only the surface of issues at the heart of the practicum experience, and thus, we hope that readers of the special theme issue find meaningful opportunities to continue the conversation with colleagues. To that end, we posed a few questions at the end of each section and present in the Appendix the complete set of questions, which we encourage readers to reproduce and use as a discussion handout at faculty meetings or other collegial networking opportunities. We invite all readers to think about these questions and consider ways their own responses help to “re-vision” the practicum experience.

Comments From University Faculty Who Teach/Coordinate Practicum Courses

1. What are the key activities in your practicum course or courses? Are there any aspects that make your practicum course(s) unique?

10 hours of classroom observation in two different teaching settings (IEP, Community College, Adult Ed, etc.); 10 hours of classroom teaching with a mentor teacher and 6 hours of one-on-one tutoring.

Students are required to work with a mentor instructor at a language academy or community college sector for 50-hours moving from observing to assisting to teaching

Students do a 20 minute micro teaching activity at the beginning of the course; students are required to videotape themselves twice during their practice teaching and to then share a “highlight” and a “lowlight” at the final class meeting.

Students write observation reports; a lesson plan and post-teaching self-evaluation; ten practicum journal entries reflecting on any topics they choose related to the practicum.

At the conclusion of the practicum, students write a final reflective essay on their experiences.

Students write online learning journals with questions posed from the week’s readings supporting candidates to make connections between theory and practice and to help them develop as reflective practitioners.

Students engage in a teaching simulation.

Student teachers design an e-portfolio with a student-centered syllabus, thematic unit plan, 2 model lessons, their philosophy of teaching as it currently stands, their curriculum vitae, 15-minute teaching demonstration, their business cards, and their action research project that they conduct in tandem with the practicum course.

TESL students complete the practicum after observing ESL classes in the community and then tutoring an ESL student for ten weeks.

Due to limited faculty our program does not offer a practicum course. In lieu of a course, students are required to audit and observe on their own an ESL class (at any level they intend to teach).

Some Questions for Reflection:

- What role does the practicum play in your program? Is the practicum course required for all students, regardless of prior teaching experience? What other opportunities do your students have for gaining *hands-on classroom practice*?
- Does your program offer more than one practicum course? For example, a practicum course for students with no experience at the beginning of the program; a practicum course for all students at the end of the program.
- What are the key activities in your practicum course, including structured opportunities for reflection (oral or written)?
- How are students evaluated in the practicum course?
- What role do micro-teaching opportunities or teaching simulations play in your practicum course?
- If your program offers practicum or other hands-on classroom practice opportunities across more than one class, in what ways are these multiple experiences coordinated to complement or build on each other?
- In what ways do university faculty interact with mentor teachers in the field as part of the practicum experience?

2. Please share one or two stories (engaging/inspiring/puzzling/worrisome) from your experience with practicum courses.

The feedback that student teachers receive in their practicum placements from their mentor teachers and supervisors some times can make student teachers feel very vulnerable.

Helping our student teachers to really let go of having that perfect lesson and perfect reception from their students and understand the realities of the classroom.

We usually have wonderful master teachers, but occasionally there are some who are not that great and student teachers do not receive a particularly good model of what it means to teach ESL.

The mentor teacher doesn't exemplify the kind of teaching the university hopes the students are learning about. For example teachers present grammar in the exact opposite mode from what we have taught our students: decontextualized, repetitive, drill-like teaching.

Under the guidance of excellent mentors, we see students blossom and it is inspiring to see what's possible when a class is free to experiment with language in meaningful contexts.

Some Questions for Reflection:

- How do mentor teachers and practicum supervisors provide adequate support and valuable feedback to student teachers on their teaching?
- How do you recruit mentor teachers? How do mentor teachers and students go about finding each other?
- How do you find/identify mentor teachers who are good role models for your student teachers?
- How do you advise student teachers when they realize the mentor teacher's approach does not match their preferred teaching approach or philosophy?

3. How has the role of the practicum course evolved in your teacher-education program over time?

ESL teachers and their classrooms have changed throughout the years but the goals of the practicum remain the same.

Inviting mentor teachers to give presentations to various TESL classes.

Systematically integrating field experiences so that by the time the student teachers take the practicum course with a 50-hour practicum requirement, they have 100-hours of observations, tutoring, small group instruction and large group instruction.

Utilizing simulation rooms where on one side a student teacher models a lesson with half the class serving as her students and on the other side of the mirror, the practicum teacher engages in discussions about teaching and teaching practice with the other half of the students.

In the past one faculty member was the primary instructor for the practicum but now we have three faculty members rotating the teaching of the practicum. This has led us to reevaluate the number of assignments, their purposes, as well as their mode of delivery. The development of technologies like cell phone video and course management systems has made it much easier to share and collect assignments from students.

Some Questions for Reflection:

- In what ways has the mode of delivery changed in your practicum course? For example, have you experienced a shift in face-to-face practicum courses to online or hybrid formats? What is the significance of these shifts?
- Are there opportunities or have you considered inviting mentor teachers to guest lecture or speak to students in your TESOL program?
- Have you had to reconsider/reevaluate assignments in your practicum courses because of faculty resources, teaching contexts, institutional limitations, and so on?
- In addition to the practicum, what other formal structures in your program offer student teachers *hands-on classroom practice or reflection*—for example, tutoring, teaching assistantships, observations, and so on?
- In what ways have current theories on teacher identity and teacher cognition prompted your program to revise the practicum course?

4. What are some challenges you see in integrating the practicum course in today's teacher-education programs?

Administrators are less apt to understand the benefits of the TESL practicum.

Partnerships are key, but partnership institutions and for mentor teachers to see value to serving in this role for a small stipend is often challenging.

We have set up several MOUs with surrounding adult schools and this has helped alleviate some of the stress and anxiety students feel when looking for a mentor teacher.

Conducting action research in tandem with a practicum course requires IRB authorization and support from the partnering institutions, which is often another challenging.

International students often express a tremendous sense of anxiety and vulnerability because of their own self-perceptions of their language proficiency levels and non-nativeness.

Availability of willing mentor teachers.

It can be a challenge to match students (with their varying backgrounds in the English language, particular teaching interests, personalities, schedule constraints, and transportation challenges) with teachers.

Some participating schools/teachers are unwilling to work with NNESTs, so international students often face even greater challenges in finding a placement.

Some Questions for Reflection:

- How does your educational institution recognize and support courses such as a practicum?
- How do you establish partnerships with programs/schools/mentor teachers?
- Do student teachers conduct action research in tandem with the practicum course? If yes, do you obtain IRB approval and how difficult/easy is the process?

5. What has been the significance of the practicum experience for students in your program?

It made me realize that the experience one has as a student teacher is very dependent on where they are and their ability to adapt is crucial in order to be successful.

In terms of the lessons learned in the course of my practicum experience, I can't stress enough what a valuable resource the supervising teacher is [to the student teacher]

I think the number one benefit of my TESL Practicum was that it was a confidence boost. It was a supportive environment in which I was allowed to explore my own teaching style and one which I got positive feedback.

Simulation lessons contributed most to my learning.

Teaching opportunities contributed most to my learning.

Even students who come in to the program with teaching experience speak positively about the practicum, with its emphasis on reflective teaching, the opportunities for varied placement (e.g., in a class where they can develop a new skill) and its multiple opportunities for feedback.

Some Questions for Reflection:

- What kind of feedback have you received from students about their practicum experiences?
- In what ways do you gather or use student feedback in making any changes to the practicum course or courses?
- What aspect of the practicum course have students deemed the most significant in terms of their professional development?

Appendix
Reflecting on the Practicum:
An Invitation to Continue the Conversation

Please feel free to copy and distribute to colleagues.

- What role does the practicum play in your program? Is the practicum course required for all students, regardless of prior teaching experience? What other opportunities do your students have for gaining *hands-on classroom practice*?
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- What aspect of the practicum course have students deemed the most significant in terms of their professional development?