Chapter 7
A Safe Space:
Practicing Teaching Skills With Avatars

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ABSTRACT

What if teacher candidates had the opportunity to practice research-based instructional strategies and the application of critical skills without fear of failure or harm to students? Would you be interested? One of the biggest challenges that teacher preparation programs face is a struggle to provide meaningful and realistic practice for pre-service teacher candidates. How do we provide practice in "real" settings with "real" students who demonstrate a depth and breadth of learning and behavioral challenges? How do we make practice sessions safe environments for both our teacher candidates and the students they serve? How do we provide needed experiences for candidates in a world where in-person learning may be curtailed by unforeseen circumstances? The purpose of this chapter is to examine the use of virtual reality simulations in education that provide scaffolded learning experiences for pre-service teachers in an online learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Research has found that student teaching is one of the most beneficial components of preparing teachers for the classroom. During student teaching, teacher candidates have an opportunity to observe their assigned host/cooperating teachers as they model best practices, assess student readiness, design and implement effective lesson plans and activities, and develop rich rewarding experiences for all students. Upon completion of their programs, pre-service teachers are then expected to be able to demonstrate pedagogical content knowledge; meet the diverse learning needs of their students, academically, developmentally, and socially; and adhere to the ethical and professional responsibilities of being an educator. Within these expectations, pre-service teachers are also responsible for effectively managing classroom behavior; collaborating and communicating with parents, colleagues, and stakeholders; and keeping up with other administrative tasks.

While these requirements and expectations are the intended outcomes for most teacher preparation programs, there are times when teacher candidates are not always able to experience the intricate scenarios or details of the classroom setting. Consistent research has found pre-service preparation in classroom management to be ineffective and inadequate, providing insufficient opportunities to practice implementing evidence-based strategies during field experiences (Ficarra & Quinn, 2014; Christofferson & Sullivan, 2015). For instance, teacher candidates may not always encounter confrontational parental conferences, disagreements with colleagues, or disruptive students during their field experiences or through online discussions with other classmates. As a result, pre-service teachers often enter the profession intimidated by certain environments and situations or feeling unprepared to take on the full array of classroom responsibilities. Their lack of confidence and preparation ultimately impacts their overall classroom performance and overall student achievement and experience.

Behavioral difficulties exhibited by students was reported as one of the challenges most often experienced by new and novice teachers (Christofferson & Sullivan, 2015). While research suggests that training in classroom management is ineffective; there is little known about the specific types and sources of classroom management training offered to pre-service teachers during preparation programs. Christofferson and Sullivan (2015) conducted a study to analyze the classroom management training and resources pre-service teachers received during their teacher preparation program, along with perceptions they held about the training received. Participants included 157 pre-service teachers throughout the United States, who were enrolled in teacher preparation programs accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Results of the study revealed that 67% of first-year teachers reported challenges with addressing and/or managing difficult behavior.

Although participants reported multiple classroom management training sources, the most common training sources were supervised fieldwork (84%), mentoring from a licensed teacher (83.8%), course work other than classroom management (78.7%), and a lecture or presentation (74.8%) (Christofferson & Sullivan, 2015). Interestingly, survey participants reported 92% of their classroom management courses covered content, including creating and teaching rules and expectations, using reinforcement strategies, creating a community of learners, and teaching procedures.

Of the multitude of sources, participants reported greater satisfaction amongst experiential training sources like mentoring from teachers and supervised fieldwork as opposed to academic training sources (Christofferson & Sullivan, 2015). It should be noted that only 60% of survey participants received a course in classroom management (Christofferson & Sullivan, 2015). The study also identified the need

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